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CHARLES A. SELTZER

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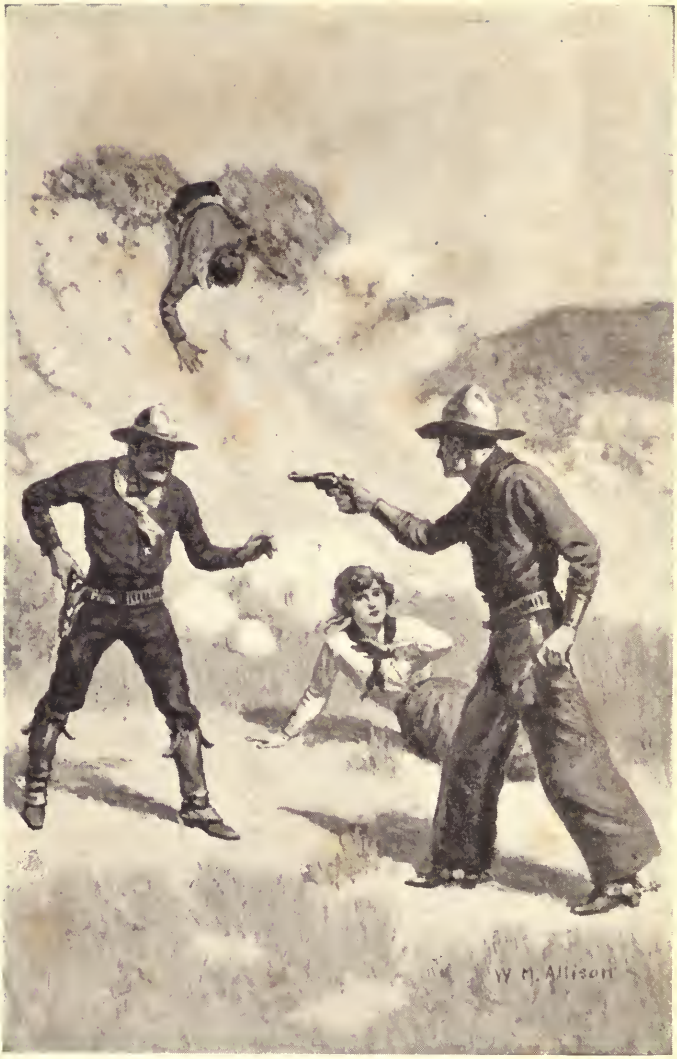

The hand flashed back again, spouting smoke and fire

WEST!

BY
CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

ILLUSTRATED BY
W. M. ALLISON

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The hand flashed back again, spouting smoke and fire . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

Twice the rider tentatively reached out 28

He had come at just the right time 78

He met Brannon's level gaze steadily 188

WEST!

WEST!

CHAPTER I

DESPITE Josephine Hamilton's eagerness to end her three days' journey, she was soothed by the dead calm that followed the stopping of the train. The deep stillness was almost vacuum-like and with a sort of strained resignation Josephine sank back among the cushions and pillows provided by an obliging porter. She gazed with some belligerence out of one of the windows of the compartment she occupied.

Outside the window was a dun, dead country, a flat drear waste, treeless, unfeatured. So far as she could see there was no horizon. She felt there ought to be one, and she tried to penetrate the level distance in order to vindicate her intelligence; but at a distance that appeared remarkably short, it seemed the dun land blended with the brassy sky, creating a haze that was very like a gauze veil. Gravely inspecting the phenomenon she became aware that the veil appeared to be composed of glittering particles swimming lazily between earth

and sky—dust, she supposed, with unromantic practicality.

And yet her eyes glowed with appreciation, with awakening interest. For the picture was one of majestic beauty. Since leaving New York she had seen nothing like it. So she pressed her face against the window-pane and stared hard.

A little later she became aware of detached, distant sounds, muffled by the closed door of the compartment—footsteps, voices; a metallic clanking as of some one pounding with a hammer; the shrill hissing of escaping steam and the banging of doors.

But she still admired the gauze veil. She observed that its colors slowly changed; that in it were flaming golden streaks and prismatic spots that ebbed and flowed and merged and blended with continuous movement, the colors so harmonious and delicate that they might have been etched by the genius of a master painter. It was not until she saw an impudent-eyed man brazenly watching her from the road-bed beneath the window of the compartment that she suddenly decided she had looked long enough. She vindictively drew the shade, her eyes flashing with indignation.

A little later, debating an impulse to summon the porter to inquire the reason for the stopping of the train, she stood before the paneled mirror tucking in some stray wisps of hair from the heavy, dark-brown coils that had been the envy of her girl

friends at the Eastern university from which she had been graduated the year before.

It was a strikingly handsome face that was reflected in the glass, with a chin that might be considered a trifle formidable by persons who did not look at her long enough to yield to the lure of the lips above it, which seemed to hint of lurking humor guarded by uncompromising moral sense. Her impulses were intellectual rather than physical.

Though undoubtedly she was aware of her attractions, there was no gleam of vanity in the clear, direct, expressive eyes that calmly returned her gaze from the glass. It seemed as though she had no delusions regarding mere physical beauty. Her probing eyes went deeper, seeking the character that animates the flesh.

After an instant she turned again to the window. The impudent-eyed man had gone. She lifted the shade, and again studied the varicolored gauze veil which seemed suspended between the train and the remote horizon.

She saw passengers walking past the window—men and women. They were going toward the rear of the train; some were talking and laughing; she observed that all seemed eager. One man, hurrying past the window, was removing a white, starched collar. He jammed the collar into a pocket of his coat and mopped the perspiration from his face with an already moist handkerchief.

Sight of the man brought into Josephine's mind the realization that the compartment was hot. She swung the door open just in time to meet the gaze of two men who were hurrying down the passageway, laughing and talking. Their eyes were eager; they were boyishly, frankly interested in the thing that was sending them hurrying down the passageway.

"Cow-boys," she heard one of them say as he passed the door of her compartment. It seemed to her that he had directed his words to her with the impersonal insinuation that he had discovered something in which she might be interested.

Was she interested in cow-boys? She hardly knew. She supposed, of course, that she would see many cow-boys when she arrived at Betty Lawson's ranch—which would be at her journey's end, and which, according to the impression she had gained from reading Betty's letters, was somewhere in the virgin wilderness beyond Willets, the last station on her railroad ticket. But she didn't know whether she was interested enough—

"You don't suppose they really mean to hang him?" floated to her ears down the passageway in the voice that had spoken before. "It doesn't seem—"

The voice was cut off by the closing of a door, but the significance of the man's words tortured

Josephine, brought her body to a rigid pose in the doorway.

For an instant she stood there, astonished, undecided, mentally repeating the man's words: "cow-boys" and "hang." She found them convincing, for one seemed to be somehow associated with the other; and she remembered that in one of Betty's letters there had been reference to a lynching, although she could n't clearly remember just why Betty had mentioned it. However, the reading had given her something of a shock, even though she had known that such things as lynchings had occurred in the West. The difference was that coming direct from Betty the word seemed to have a closer and more tragic meaning than when it had appeared in the brief telegraphic reports of the newspapers.

It seemed incredible that such a thing was permitted to happen in America, that there was a possibility of its happening right now, close to her. And yet when she reflected upon the grim aspect of the country through which the train had been passing for the last day or so, when she considered the vast distances that separated one town from another, and the futile appearance of the towns themselves, it was apparent that much could happen of which the recognized law could have no knowledge.

She was aware of a new silence, which was deeper and somehow more solemn than that which had followed the stopping of the train a few minutes ago. The stillness in the car seemed to have become strangely premonitory, like that which precedes tragedy imminent and expected. And now she knew what had been meant by the spectacle of the passengers hurrying toward the rear of the train.

She put on the felt hat Betty Lawson had advised her to bring, got into a light traveling-coat, slammed the door of the compartment, and hurried down the passageway.

It seemed she was the last passenger to leave the train, for no one followed her and an engulfing silence marked her movements as she stepped from the car to the road-bed. Beset with a strange eagerness, which was founded upon a dread curiosity and a reluctance to become an outsider in what was transpiring, she hurried toward the rear of the train, where she saw the other passengers congregating.

None seemed to notice her as she joined the the group, and so she slipped into a convenient space and edged forward until she was able to see what object had intrigued the interest of the other passengers.

There were many objects of interest. Seven, to be exact. Of the seven, six were cow-boys. There could be no doubt of that. For though Josephine

had never seen a cow-boy until that instant she felt she could not be mistaken.

They were grouped on a little level beside the railroad track, not more than twenty or thirty feet from the rear coach of the train; and it was evident they had been there before the train had stopped, for Josephine saw the dying embers of a fire with some white smoke curling lazily upward from it. Scattered about were saddles and blankets. At a little distance were several horses, grazing upon some green-brown grass.

To Josephine the saddles, blankets, and horses were insignificant details. She saw them, but her interest had settled definitely and completely upon the cow-boys, for they were to be the chief figures in the dread drama she had been visualizing from the instant she had overheard the two men in the passageway talking about them.

She watched them eagerly, intently, with level disapproval, with unmistakable antagonism, with a dislike that was positively vicious.

A woman standing close to her spoke to a big man who wore a soft brown coat, traveling-cap, crinkled trousers, and slippers—a man with a fat, smooth face and with cynical, self-sufficient eyes, whose thick lips were caressing an obese cigar.

"Are n't they romantic?" she remarked.

"H'm'm," grunted the man, doubtfully; "we-ell—mebbe. That depends."

Josephine did not listen to his dissertation upon what "depended." She thought the cow-boys looked positively vicious. She had little expectation that romance could masquerade in the dark muzzles of the pistols that sagged from the low-swung holsters; that the bold, reckless faces of the men concealed the sort of character suggested by the remark of the woman who had spoken.

For Josephine was entertaining a prejudice. The words of the man in the passageway, "you don't suppose they really mean to hang him?" had presupposed a situation that was directly at variance with principles by which she had been governed all her days—principles which frowned upon mob-violence. And any hanging not legally performed must, of necessity, be unlawful.

Josephine was convinced that this hanging was to be unlawful. She had no doubt there was to be a hanging; for while the big man in the brown coat talked, Josephine's eyes had sought out the probable victim.

He was sitting on a little hummock behind the cow-boys. He was hatless, coatless. His hair was disheveled; there was a gash on his forehead where the blood had dried. His face was dirty, and a stubble beard made him look villainous. His hands were tied behind him: and though he sneered malevolently under the scrutiny of the group of passengers, Josephine's sympathy for him was real and

acute. She was sure he could not be over twenty—twenty-five, perhaps. Certainly not older. And to be facing that kind of a death! And innocent, perhaps! Who were these men that they dared to judge him—to condemn him, without due process of law?

She had been staring at the cow-boys collectively. Now, aroused, she began to examine them individually, with malice that precluded any possibility of favorable judgment.

Four of the cow-boys were distinctly and undeniably resentful and embarrassed over the scrutiny to which they were subjected by the passengers; for the latter were very plainly betraying an eager interest which said, wordlessly, that cow-boys were curiosities to be placed in the category of oddities along with Indians, mountains, deserts, rattlesnakes, scorpions, horned toads, and other features of the country—later to be dragged forth by memory and exhibited as "specimens."

The four tried to conceal their resentment. They regarded the assembled passengers with thinly disguised disapprobation, and with ironic smiles so shallow that the embarrassment beneath was visible. Josephine quickly decided the four were negligible, despite their bold, bronzed faces and their remarkably steady eyes—and the huge pistols at their hips. Save that the environment was different, they were merely young men who hired out their bodies as

did certain young men of the East—farm hands for example. They did as they were told.

It did not take Josephine long to single out the brain of the cow-boy group—the man who possessed qualities of leadership which would logically make him the guiding spirit.

He sat on a flat rock at a slight distance from the others. He was leaning slightly forward, his elbows on his knees, his fingers locked. His big felt hat was pushed back from his forehead, and his eyes, as he watched the passengers, were steady, unembarrassed, glowing with lazy good humor which had a trace of amused contempt in it.

He was tall, booted, bepistoled. The boots were dusty, the soft tops much scuffed. The chaps that covered his long legs were worn and scarred. The gray woolen shirt he wore had long sleeves which were buttoned tightly at the wrists. The garment was worn loosely at the throat, where a blue neckerchief sagged.

However, it was not the man's appearance that held Josephine's interest, though she grudgingly admitted he was good-looking. It was something else—a singular confidence and ease that radiated from him, which lurked all over him, as though he was conscious of power and authority which would be expressed whenever he felt disposed to express them.

Such was Josephine's first estimate of him. The

estimate persisted until, with the collective gaze of the passengers upon him, she saw his eyes narrow slightly, to glow with saturnine humor. And then she was convinced that lurking behind his consciousness of power and authority was a malicious devil.

Josephine hated him. As his slow gaze swept the passengers and paused for an infinitesimal space upon her, she stiffened, frowned. If he was aware of the frown he gave no sign; his gaze swept slowly on.

"There 's a character," Josephine heard the big man in the brown coat whisper to the woman beside him. "You 'll notice all the others are a little upset because we have interrupted their fun. But not him! That guy is smooth and easy and deep; nothing disturbs him. By George! I 'd hate to cross him!"

Josephine felt a sudden contempt for the big man, for his inability correctly to judge a member of his own sex. Did n't the big man know that the other was merely a bloodthirsty bully who at this instant was posing and enjoying the situation in which he found himself, which gave him a chance to parade his power over the poor wretch he and his men intended to hang.

There were many passengers. They had spread, fanwise, from the rear coach to a point some yards down the right of way, in a line that was irregular

and noticeably concaved immediately in front of the group of cow-boys—a discreet, though perhaps accidental formation.

It was hot: the cindered right of way exuded stifling heat-waves; many of the passengers were mopping their faces with handkerchiefs.

Josephine was not warm. A cold rage had seized her—an indignation that took no account of physical discomfort; an indignation aroused over the spectacle of the passengers dumbly submitting to the horror that was about to be enacted, that certainly would be not long deferred after the departure of the train. There were perhaps a hundred male passengers, and not one of them seemed to have the courage to interfere.

She moved forward slightly, aware that the instant she spoke she would become badly conspicuous, like an orator alone on a rostrum. Also she was certain she would expose herself to criticism, perhaps to ridicule. But she was determined to interfere.

However, in the act of opening her lips to speak, she heard a voice:

"Our fire has gone out, ladies and gentlemen. You see we did n't expect company for breakfast, or we 'd have kept her humming. But mostly the grub has played out, anyway. You 're all looking mighty hungry! Don't the trains carry grub any more?"

It was a subtle speech. The passengers were hungry—for adventure; for anything that would break the monotony of continuous, tiresome travel. And their faces reflected their appreciation of the strangeness of the present spectacle and of the gentleness of the man's voice, where they had expected harshness for their rather impertinent curiosity.

Yes; the speaker was the man who sat on the rock, the cow-boy leader. His voice had been low and gravely quizzical, with a trace of mocking laughter in it. And his eyes were gleaming.

"Did n't I tell you?" whispered the big man in the brown coat. "He 's deep, that guy. He 's got brains!"

It was the big man who answered. The other passengers variously expressed their delight over the cow-boy's speech—chuckling, whispering, nodding their heads. But the man in the brown coat spoke directly to the cow-boy.

"Trains don't carry the sort of grub we 're seeing right now!" he declared.

"Well," said the other, grinning widely and shoving his hat farther back on his forehead, revealing a shock of glossy black hair, "the boys would n't make very good eating right now, straight or scrambled. Some of them would be rank poison, because they 're feeling some disturbed over having so many hungry folks looking at them at the same time."

"That ought to settle it," laughed the big man.

"That makes it pretty plain. Speaking for myself, I beg your pardon."

"You 're welcome," said the other gently. He fixed the other passengers with a narrowing, gleaming eye; and a faint smile reached his lips as he noted a shuffling movement, preparatory to a retreat.

But though Josephine had been aware of the underplay of the cow-boy's words, inviting the passengers to feast their eyes upon objects less personal, she had no intention of retreating—at least, not until she made an effort to save the life of the wretch who sat behind the black-haired man.

She stepped out of the press, and was instantly aware that the action drew upon her the collectively curious gaze of the other passengers—and also the steady, inquiring scrutiny of the black-haired cow-boy.

"What are you going to do with that man?" she demanded, pointing to the captive, who curled his upper lip at her question.

"Meaning Les Artwell, I reckon?" said the black-haired man, slowly. "So that 's what brought you all swarming around us, eh? Well, you 've guessed it. We 're going to hang him, ma'am."

CHAPTER II

THE black-haired man's voice was gentle. But it seemed to Josephine that the gentleness was entirely surface, that underlying it was a steel-line inflexibility that hinted of the hopelessness of interference on her part.

Instead of being dismayed, however, Josephine was conscious of a strange antagonism and a bitter resentment which were entirely personal and had nothing whatever to do with principles; least of all the principles that had impelled her to interfere.

Josephine had completely forgotten that she had set out to prevent the hanging because it seemed unauthorized and illegal. She was now merely passionately resentful of the unyielding quality she had discovered in the voice of the black-haired man. She wanted to shake him! She yearned to march past him and release the prisoner. She wanted to show him that he could not do as he pleased, even though there was no law within hundreds of miles!

But she did not yield to those savage, primitive impulses. And she knew the deterring influence was to be found in the eyes of the black-haired man. Somehow the eyes chilled her, persuaded her from testing the texture of the steel underlying his sur-

face gentleness. She felt that if she attempted any of the primitive methods she contemplated she would be defeated. And she could not endure defeat before all the passengers.

She saw something else in the eyes of the black-haired man—frank, bold admiration. More, the admiration, strangely, seemed articulate; it seemed to express the conviction that she was a very brave young woman thus to stand out from the crowd to take the prisoner's part. The others had not had the courage!

But also there was mockery in the admiration. Her bravery was to be futile. For all the good her interference would do she might as well get back on the train and go her way.

She saw that in his eyes. Well, she would n't go! The black-haired man could n't bully her with his steel-like gentleness. Nor could his bold admiration dissuade her from her determination to save a life. She would not permit him to draw the mask of comedy over tragedy!

Her divination of the steel-like quality of his character had warned her that she must use her wits against him; she could not hope to beat him in a direct clash. That would mean defeat and humiliation, to her.

"What has the man done?"

She spoke calmly. She exulted in her self-con-

trol, congratulating herself that she had not spoken while her passions had been ruling her.

"He stole a horse, ma'am."

"And you intend to hang him for that?"

"That 's the intention."

"Whose intention?"

"Why mine, ma'am—all of us. That 's the law. We caught him with the goods."

"Meaning that you caught him in the act?"

"That 's it."

"Who made that law?"

"I don't know that anybody made it. I reckon it was established by custom. We can't all ride on trains, ma'am, and there's times in this country when a man's life depends on his having a horse. This is a big country to walk through."

"But there are other horses. This man did n't steal them all."

"That is n't the question. He stole one. He was caught riding it."

"When did you catch him?"

"Last night."

"Here?"

"A couple of miles north."

"Why did you bring him here?"

"This section is sort of shy on trees, ma'am. We figured on using a telegraph pole."

Josephine shuddered. She felt a tremor run

through the crowd around her. The other passengers were close to her now, having moved forward while she had been talking. When she became aware of the concerted movement, which seemed like a collective shrinking over the dread object visualized by all of them at the words of the black-haired man, Josephine also became aware that the passengers had entirely surrounded the black-haired man and herself, that necks were craning toward her, and that the owners of the necks were eager-eyed and tense for more of the conversation. Perhaps in the minds of all of them had been a reluctance to permit the hanging, and they were paying her the tribute of their eager attention because she was doing a thing they had not had the courage to do.

"Why don't you take him on to the next town and turn him over to the law?" she asked.

She noted that the four cow-boys who had betrayed embarrassment at the stares of the passengers were now a part of the group that surrounded her and the black-haired man, that their embarrassment had vanished, and they appeared to be keenly amused by the questioning. It seemed they were relieved that they were no longer considered, that the black-haired man had been singled out for whatever interference was to come.

They were plainly enjoying the situation. Their bold bronze faces were animated with keen ap-

preciation; their extravagant winks at one another betrayed them.

"There's no law nearer than Laskar," said the black-haired man. "That's beyond Willets, and too much trouble. Besides, they 'd play politics with him and he 'd get off. And we 'd get laughed at for our trouble."

"Trouble! But you have no right to hang him!"

"I reckon you 're green to this country, ma'am. Les Artwell is a horse-thief. We 've got a way of dealing with horse-thieves. Maybe it is n't your way. We won't argue about that. But you must n't come out here and get the idea that you can run this country to suit yourself; because the country 's been here a considerable spell, and folks who live here are not asking any advice."

Josephine's cheeks paled with rage at the rebuff. He saw the scornful contempt in her eyes, and his own glinted with a steady, amused tolerance —an expression he might have used to rebuke a child too insistently curious.

At this instant the big man in the brown coat created a diversion. And the black-haired man's gaze left Josephine.

The man in the brown coat was talking. Josephine did not hear him, for a whispering voice at her shoulder swayed her interest sharply in that direction.

"Sort of swelled, eh?" said the voice.

She started, would have turned.

"Don't look around," said the voice; "he'll get wise. I 'm straw-boss, under him. You 're dead right; he ought to let Artwell go. He ain't guilty. He had a bill of sale for that hoss. But he lost it. If you think we could get Artwell on the train I could manage to cut his hands free."

She turned her head and looked into the man's face. He was one who had kept himself apart from the others. During the time the other men had been enduring the stares of the passengers this man had kept his back to them, seemingly in the grip of a perverse passion. Twice since she had joined the group Josephine had caught glimpses of his profile, to see a sneer on his lips.

Then the sneers had had no significance; now it was apparent they reflected his attitude toward the black-haired man.

The self-styled "straw-boss" was darkly handsome. Perhaps his black eyes were a little too insinuatingly friendly, presupposing her readiness to league herself with him in an effort to free the prisoner; and his manner might have been a trifle too ingratiating, and his voice too smooth. Yet Josephine responded quickly to his startling suggestion.

"If you can get him on the train I 'll take care of him," she whispered.

A pulse of vindicative triumph shot through her. She moved backward out of the crowd, while the man in the brown coat continued to talk.

Some of the passengers glanced at her as she moved; many sympathetically, as though they would help her gracefully to accept defeat; others watched her derisively. But almost instantly they turned their attention to the big man in the brown coat.

Apparently the cow-boy leader did not observe her withdrawal. He was still talking to the man in the brown coat; and the four cow-boys who had mingled with the crowd were still interestedly listening and grinning.

Josephine walked slowly to the rear coach of the train. Mounting the lower step she had to lean outward to see the cow-boy group and the passengers, for they were almost opposite the front of the coach ahead of the one upon whose steps she was standing. The rear coach, and part of the other, would have to pass the group on its way westward.

Josephine saw the straw-boss move with apparent carelessness toward the prisoner. She noted that he seemed to speak casually to the other; and then she caught the gleam of a knife that, she felt, was cutting the prisoner's bonds.

Outwardly Josephine betrayed no sign that she was engaged in a plot to save the life of a fellow-

being. Her lips were a trifle grim and her cheeks whiter than usual, and her hands trembled slightly as she gripped the iron railing of the platform.

She drew a deep sigh. Simultaneously there came a prolonged shriek of the locomotive-whistle, followed by several sharp blasts, which she knew was an announcement that the train was about to proceed. She had not heard why the train had stopped in the first place, though she had supposed, basing her thought upon the metallic hammering, that some minor accident had occurred. Whatever the cause, the train was now ready to proceed.

She saw the crowd break up. The passengers began to scatter to front and rear, urged by several impatient blasts of the whistle. She heard the voice of a trainman exhorting the passengers to hurry. Some of the passengers swarmed past her into the rear coach; but she held her place on the steps, grimly determined not to leave it.

Some of the passengers recognized her and gave her admiring grins. Some of the women passengers were not so charitable.

However, Josephine was too excited to observe expressions carefully. She drew a breath of relief when the passengers had all crowded past her; for she could see that the cow-boys had not noticed that the straw-boss had liberated the prisoner, or that the prisoner was ready to make a dash for the

train. The straw-boss, she saw, was standing near the cow-boy leader.

The cow-boys stood facing the coach ahead of Josephine. The four bold-faced men were grinning broadly and talking to one another; the cow-boy leader was again sitting on the boulder, staring meditatively downward.

There was another startling blast from the whistle, a series of preliminary bumps and jerks, and the train began to move.

Josephine drew a slow, deep quivering breath of dread anticipation. Would the prisoner seize this opportunity? Would the cow-boys shoot?

The answer to these questions came almost instantly. The train was gliding past the cow-boy group when she saw the prisoner plunge forward, hurl himself past the cow-boys, and leap toward her.

As he swung upward, past her, she turned her back to the cow-boys, to shield the prisoner. The cow-boys would not dare to shoot *her!*

She glanced sidelong at them, to see that the cow-boys were in motion. The straw-boss had evidently awkwardly attempted to get out of the leader's way when the latter had noticed the prisoner's escape; for both men had fallen and the leader was just getting up as Josephine's glance rested on him. The prisoner was already safely inside the car.

By the time Josephine clambered to the platform the cow-boy leader was running toward his horse, his long legs making giant strides.

Her enjoyment of the spectacle was vindictive.

"He 'll need seven-league boots to catch us, now!" she found herself saying. For the train had gathered speed rapidly; already the cow-boys were far behind.

Then she heard a commotion behind her. She wheeled, to face the prisoner, a captive in the grip of a giant negro porter.

"Don't make no diffrunce a-tall!" the porter said. "You goin' to git off this hyeh train right now! You 'm that hoss-thief them boys caught. If you don't git off peaceable I 'll bust you in the eye!"

"Porter!"

Josephine was at the other's side in an instant, whispering excitedly. "I 'll pay his fare, porter!"

"All right, miss," he said; "I 'll find the conductor."

When the porter turned to make his way through the car he was forced to elbow a number of passengers aside, among them the man in the brown coat, who was grinning. Josephine heard him remark to some one:

"That young woman certainly has the courage of her convictions!"

The remark was not strikingly original, but

Josephine blushed with embarrassment, though her chin was a little more formidable than usual. At least she had the courage to save the life of an innocent man.

An instant later her face grew very pale. For she heard a clatter above the subdued roar of the train, and glanced rearward to see a horse and rider close to the platform.

The rider was the black-haired man. He was on a big, black horse which was thundering toward the train at an alarming rate. The horse was clean-limbed, powerful, rangy. There was spirit in his wild, glowing eyes, terrific energy in the mighty muscles that leaped and writhed under his glossy coat as he hurled himself after the speeding train. To Josephine the animal loomed gigantic; he was the indomitable medium fate had hurled after her for the purpose of thwarting her effort to save a principle from destruction. She got the impression watching him. Also she received something of the same impression as she glanced at his rider.

The black-haired man was a grim figure. He bestrode his horse as though he had been part of the animal; and he was so close to the platform that Josephine could see his eyes. She could tell by the expression in them that he meant to win.

Josephine was equally determined. The rider must have seen the challenge in her eyes, the grim

determination of her manner, for a faint, mirthless smile twitched at his lips. He was within a few feet of the platform now, and he swung one leg over the black's back in preparation for a leap. He had caught the reins firmly in one hand; the other began to reach out as though to seize the rail of the platform.

Josephine moved toward the point where it seemed the rider's hand must grip the rail. Twice the rider tentatively reached out, his fingers ready to grip the rail; and each time Josephine kicked savagely at them. Once the toe of her shoe struck the iron, but the second time she felt the leather graze the clutching fingers.

The rider did not attempt to seize the rail again, for the black horse stumbled, began to fall back. This strange trail was broken, full of abrupt depressions, hazardous, for the cinder level had ended and the spaces between the ties themselves thrust their sharp corners upward.

The black horse slowed from instinct. Gradually the space between train and horse widened until, acknowledging defeat, the rider drew the animal down. He swung back into the saddle, drew his broad hat from his head, swept it downward and bowed derisively to Josephine.

Josephine stood on the platform until horse and rider grew toy-like in her vision. She smiled triumphantly and made her way to the center of

Twice the rider tentatively reached out

the car, where she met the conductor and Artwell. She paid Artwell's fare, to Laskar, beyond Willets.

Then, with the stares of the passengers following her, she passed out of the car to go to her compartment, confident that the ends of justice had been served.

CHAPTER III

JOSEPHINE HAMILTON'S mind was occupied with distances. At the beginning of her second week at the Lawson ranch she was deeply impressed as she had been on the morning following her arrival, when she had got her first view of the new world into which she had come.

As she sat in a cushioned rocker on the wide, shady lower veranda of the Lawson ranch-house this morning, she was convinced that distances could not be appreciated by viewing them from the window of a Pullman. One must not merely pass through distances at so many miles per hour; one must be engulfed by them.

She felt engulfed, if engulfed meant to be entirely surrounded; she was considering the various synonyms of "atom," wondering if she could select one which would correctly describe her relative insignificance in the gigantic wilderness that stretched under the clear, cloudless, smiling skies.

However, at all events she was a sentient atom, even though after a week, awe was still the emotion that dominated her.

It was an awe of sheer bigness. The Creator

had touched this world with a lavish, generous hand. It was as though, with space so unlimited, He had proportioned things with a gigantic measure. He also had imparted to this section of the world a ruggedness which hinted at endurance eternal. And then, as though the Creator had been aware that He had builded with exceeding skill, He had wrought a marvelous clarity in the atmosphere, foreshortening vast distances so that the eye could comprehend the magnificence of His work.

Southward a mountain range thrust its serrated peaks into a calm blue sky. The mountains seemed near, and yet Betty Lawson had told her the distance to their bases was not less than thirty miles. Josephine had secretly doubted that statement until her attention had been called to the intervening country. And then she saw that between the mountains and the ranch-house there spread at least half a dozen forests—whose trees she took for bushes until Betty very seriously and calmly assured her that some of them were cottonwoods that must have been there for hundreds of years—and no end of big valleys and gullies and draws, together with hills, and rather extensive levels upon which a herd of cattle could graze for weeks. Also, Betty pointed out narrow threads of silver glittering in the sunlight, which she assured Josephine were considerable rivers and creeks; and rugged buttes (which Josephine had thought were large rocks)

having sheer walls that rose to appalling heights.

It was like looking at a map that had been decorated by a master painter, a map that was tilted slightly at its farthest edges to create the impression of an upland.

Not only when gazing southward did she gain that impression. It was the same eastward, westward, northward. She was in the center of a huge circle, a saucer-shaped circle sixty miles in diameter. A virgin wilderness such as it had been when God finished it stretched away mile on mile, silent, slumberous, mysterious, beautiful; though sinister in its threat of cruelty toward those who did not know its secrets.

She was certain the land held secrets. She felt them in the silences; they were borne to her on the whispering breezes that swept out of mysterious reaches and blew steadily against her, laden with the clear pungent aroma of sage.

Betty Lawson had met her at Willets; and they had reached the ranch-house late at night. The unfamiliar trail over which Betty had driven her was, she had thought, the reason she had been aware of a strange depression of spirit, even though she had not betrayed herself to Betty. Riding toward the ranch-house that night she had felt she was entering a ghostly region where danger, invisible and terrible, lurked on every hand. She had seeemd to be riding into a vacuum.

Morning had not dispelled the impression of the night. Nature seemed to wait, derisively masking her secrets. There was a hush in the atmosphere, a brooding, menacing silence which made her feel that all the invisible and threatening forces around her were biding their time; were waiting until she should be surely in their power before they revealed themselves.

Even the ranch buildings seemed to be surrounded by a brooding, slumberous silence. All sound was sharp, jarring, shattering, when there was sound. When some one moved inside the ranch-house the sound could be heard distinctly outside. If some one spoke the voice carried with a resonance that startled her. If a horse neighed in the far pasture, half a mile distant, it was as though the animal had been merely around a corner of the house.

Betty and a Chinese cook were the only persons, beside herself, who occupied the house. Mr. Lawson and Betty's mother had gone East for the summer. Mrs. Lawson's health demanded a change of scene.

Josephine had seen plenty of cow-boys. The bunk and mess-houses were at a distance from the ranch-house. They were grouped on a little level near a big corral which spanned a narrow, shallow river; and Josephine had observed that there always seemed to be cow-boys around the buildings.

But not once had she been near enough to any of them to determine what type of men they were. She supposed they were like the cow-boys she had seen on the day she had rescued the horse-thief; and she told herself she did not care to go near them.

She saw them ride in, dismount, turn their horses into the corral; saw them washing their faces from tin wash-basins that stood on a bench that ranged the outside wall of the mess-house.

She heard the sound of their voices; she heard laughter, and some profanity. She wondered if they knew the profanity could be heard, and quickly decided that if they were like the men she had seen that day on her way to Willets, they would not care if they were heard.

She had not spoken to Betty of her experience with the black-haired man, for she was reluctant to have Betty see her in the rôle that would shatter her friend's preconceived notions of the calm masterfulness Betty so much admired. Also, she was afraid Betty's alert keen-mindedness would discern in her action less of a championship of principle than of a natural human instinct to have one's way about a thing. Betty had a quiet, probing eye and a habit of direct speech that often had disconcerted Josephine.

During the hundred and fifty-mile ride to Willets after the rescue, Josephine had not seen the horse-thief. She had not cared to talk with him, for

she was not interested in him, had not been interested in him at any time except to prevent the black-haired man from hanging him.

But this morning she was thinking of him, and of the black-haired man—how the latter had looked as he had sat on the rock that day, his keen, steady, mocking eyes watching the passengers. She had felt the man's aggressive personality that day; the inflexibility of his character, his cold, calm confidence. He had seemed so sure of himself; had seemed to be so completely oblivious of the fact that persons other than himself might have convictions, and determination, fully as strong as his own. That was why she had hated him.

She was staring meditatively northward—a picture of the train, the cow-boys, and the black-haired man in mind—when she became aware of a presence behind her, and turned to see Betty Lawson. She had been so absorbed in her mental picture that she had not heard Betty approaching. She blushed from the realization that she was spending a great deal of time thinking of the black-haired man.

"Still staring at the country, Jo; you do a lot of it. If I did 'nt know you as well as I do, I 'd think you were expecting some one!"

Betty's voice was light with banter. But her clear, brown eyes were a-gleam with concern—and some speculation. One had to bury one's emotions

very deep to keep Betty's probing eyes from uncovering them.

The girl was keenly appreciative of life. The phenomena of life interested her. The set of her head, the way she squared her shoulders, facing all things fairly, told of wonderful vitality, eagerness, directness, wholesomeness.

"You 've been moping too much since you 've been here, Jo," she said, watching her friend. "You 've seen too much of the country from the gallery, and not enough from the saddle. You are going riding with me."

"I never rode a horse in my life!" declared Josephine.

"You are beginning now. I 've had one of the men saddle Chesterfield for you. Chesterfield is mild-mannered and dependable. He has n't bucked since Noah turned him out of the ark. He likes ladies, especially Eastern ladies. He 'll like you, more especially because he 'll recognize in you a constitutional timidity not unlike his own. Come on, Jo!" she wheedled.

Josephine got up rather uncertainly, affected by Betty's breezy jocularity. She was given no opportunity to decline, for the instant she was on her feet Betty seized her by the shoulders, wheeled her around, and pushed her toward the open doorway leading into the big living-room.

"Put on your most disreputable duds," advised

Betty. "This is n't Riverside Drive, you know, and if we meet anybody it will be an accident, or a miracle. Hustle! We 'll ride over and have a talk with Mrs. Whitman. That 's only ten miles. Mrs. Whitman is an invalid."

"I thought there were no other—"

"Thought we had Paradise Valley to ourselves, I suppose. Well, we have n't. There are Ben Whitman, who is quite a philosopher in a way; Satan Lattimer, a big brute whose name fits him like a kid glove; and half a dozen nesters who have come in within the last year or so. They —the nesters—are on the rim of the basin, though; and they don't count—unless we miss cattle."

"Satan Lattimer!" said Josephine, halting in the doorway and studying Betty's face. "That name suggests—"

"It describes him to a T!" said Betty, her lips tightening. "He is a devil. Every evil thing that happens in this basin is laid at his door. He 's handsome, terribly, darkly handsome. He 's a ruthless, smiling devil. If he had lived two hundred years ago he would have been a pirate. But he 's a man, Jo; every inch of him. He stands out of the crowd, he dominates. That is, he dominates everybody but Ben Whitman and 'Steel' Brannon, dad's ranch-boss. His real name is not 'Steel' at all, but Neal; they got to calling him 'Steel'

because he 's like that metal when somebody crosses him.

"There are other men in this section of the country; there 's dad, and there are the men of our outfit, and still other men over at Willets.

"None of them counts, except perhaps dad, who is n't as young as he once was. Ben Whitman, Satan Lattimer, and Steel Brannon are the real forces around here. You 'll feel them instantly, once you meet them. There 's something about them, even about Satan Lattimer, that makes you realize they are different. I think it is a matter of heredity and breeding. You feel that the strain ran back in a straight line—no wavering, no side journeys. I don't know exactly what I mean, but I have always felt that Whitman, Lattimer, and Brannon are the sons of men who amounted to something. I think Whitman's forebears were hunters or trappers, men who lived in solitudes and who established habits of thinking deeply because there was no one about to bother them.

"Lattimer's ancestors were very like buccaneers or swash-buckling gentlemen of fortune; while Steel Brannon is a descendant of Boone.

"Anyway, Jo, they are real men; bonnie men of muscle and brawn and steel and fire. I like them, even Lattimer, although I know Lattimer would n't hesitate an instant to carry a woman away to the mountains if he got an opportunity."

"Betty!" said Josephine, sharply.

"You 're West, Jo," came the unsmiling reply. "We deal in straight talk; there 's no shilly-shallying." Her manner changed; her eyes danced, she spoke authoritatively:

"Come on, now. Get ready. We are losing time."

Josephine had loved Betty for the very quality of straightforwardness that various other girls at school had affected to dislike. She and Betty had been very intimate.

Josephine had found Betty to be sturdily, almost militantly virtuous, though there was nothing of the prude in her. She was honest and direct in speech and action, rebuffing in terms unmistakable men who transgressed, insisting that she would have no man *hunting* her, and that when the time came she would choose her man, perhaps tell him of her choice. But despite these rather startling qualities of character she was tender, sympathetic, and endowed with a wonderful womanliness and a capacity for deep, real passion. Josephine had wondered much about her; she now had a divination that what she had once considered belligerence in the girl was merely a mask, adopted to hold off the rough men among whom she had been forced to live.

Josephine's preparations for the ride were simple, for she followed Betty's injunction to "put on your

most disreputable duds." She got into a shirt-waist and skirt, and pulled over her wealth of hair the felt hat she had worn on the train, pausing an instant to peer critically at her reflection in a glass. What she saw there reassured her, even though she had drawn the hat so far down that it almost hid her hair, giving her a boyish, and a rather impish, appearance.

Then she walked toward the door leading to the veranda. She had almost reached it when she saw a horseman at the edge of the gallery. He was sitting crosswise in the saddle, his long legs dangling. His arms were folded across his chest, and he was smiling down at Betty, who stood near him.

It was her hated enemy, the black-haired man.

CHAPTER IV

JOSEPHINE'S first impulse was founded upon panic, ignoble, shameful. She wanted to run.

How she conquered the impulse she did not know. Perhaps Betty's voice dissuaded her; for Betty's words were very distinct:

"So you let him escape? O Brannon!"

There was disappointment in Betty's voice; it verged closely upon anger. Certainly it betrayed a strained patience.

However, Josephine was concerned only with the significance of the words; they revealed clearly two astonishing and startling facts: that the black-haired man was "Steel" Brannon, and that Betty had known he was pursuing Les Artwell, the horse-thief.

"Artwell ought to be mighty thankful *that* girl was on the train," said Brannon. His voice was dryly humorous, and though Josephine could not see his face she felt his lips were curving in that peculiar faint smile she had seen on them more than once when he had been watching the passengers who had surrounded him.

"She 's foxy, all right," he went on in the same dry tone; "and she 's got grit. I 'd add that she 's

a mighty good-looker, if I was n't afraid you 'd think I let her fool me on that account. It was n't that. She 'd been arguing with me about letting Artwell off, and I 'd convinced her she did n't know what she was talking about. So she sneaked away. But after the train started to pull out I missed Artwell.

"Somebody had cut Artwell loose—the girl, I reckon. Anyway Artwell was n't where he 'd been all along. I was certain he 'd got on the train, so I rode after it. The girl was standing on the rear platform, and she was dead set on keeping me off of it. Kicked at my hands when I tried to grab the rail and knocked some bark off my fingers.

"I did n't chase the train far; the going got pretty bad. I was afraid my horse would break a leg, which I would n't have happen for a dozen horse-thieves."

"What was her object?" inquired Betty.

"Just to get him off, I reckon," Brannon laughed mirthlessly. "She talked some of law—seeming to think we had no right to hang Artwell. I sized her up as a woman with brains who 'd got long on principle—the principle of taking what she wants."

"Where did it happen, Brannon?"

"About a hundred and fifty miles east of Willets. We 'd been after Artwell for three days and caught

him about two miles north of the railroad. We figured on using a telegraph pole, but we did n't aim to send Artwell off unprepared. Seemed he needed a lot of preparation. We gave him time, camping beside the railroad track and setting a watch over him. I reckon we ought to have hurried the thing a little; but you know how it is."

"Yes." Betty's voice was low: Josephine thought she detected relief in it, and was strangely grateful. It proved that despite Betty's disappointment, expressed in her first words to Brannon, she was really glad Artwell had escaped.

Josephine's face was burning with shame and embarrassment—shame that she had stood there so long, listening to a conversation she had no right to hear; and embarrassment over the knowledge that she must immediately reveal herself.

No other course would be fair to Betty. And the longer she delayed the deeper would her sense of guilt become.

Yet courage of a rare sort was required deliberately to thrust herself unannounced into the presence of the black-haired man at this moment. Some women would have delayed, would have found some excuse to postpone the ordeal. But in an instant Josephine had done it. There was a tightening of lips, a setting of the eyes, a squaring of the chin that could be so formidable, and she stood in the open doorway, straight, rigid, defiant.

Brannon saw her first, because Betty was facing another direction. Josephine had expected him to exclaim violently or at least betray some sign of excitement or agitation.

Nothing of the kind happened. Brannon betrayed no outward sign of emotion at sight of her. Not a muscle of his body moved; he did not even change color. His eyes, though, steady as they had been when they had gazed at her that other time, had depths that she could not fathom.

Of one thing she became certain as she stood looking at him—he did not intend to recognize her, or at least betray her to Betty.

Betty, who knew Brannon better than he suspected, had observed a change in him. Her gaze had been upon him all along, and she had plumbed the depths that had baffled Josephine. She knew something amused Brannon.

She turned, and saw Josephine; noted the paleness of her friend's face, and how her chin was squared. She also became aware of the set belligerence in Josephine's eyes.

But she masked her knowledge with a smile and a courtesy.

"Jo," she said, "I want you to meet Mr. Neal Brannon, our ranch-boss."

"I met Mr. Brannon a few days ago," said Josephine steadily. "If I am not mistaken, he has just been telling you about it. I prevented a hang-

ing which would not have been strictly legal, in my opinion."

"Jo! You don't mean—"

"Yes," grimly interrupted Josephine; "I am the girl who defended a principle—the principle of taking what one wants." She looked straight at Brannon.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Betty. "Why, I had no idea—"

She paused, looked at both Brannon and Josephine; saw the humor in Brannon's eyes, now grown eloquent; observed in Josephine's eyes the telltale signs of rage, and instantly leagued herself with her guest.

"Brannon," she said sharply, "please attend to the matter we were speaking about!"

Brannon bowed, swung back into the saddle, and rode away. He had almost reached the corral gates when Betty turned to her friend.

"Tell me about, it, Jo," she invited, gently.

"Yes," she said, when Josephine had briefly told her story; "it must have seemed cruel and brutal to you; and I don't know but that you were perfectly right in interfering. Perhaps I should have done so myself if I had been there.

"But Brannon told you the truth. Law as law is a farce in this section. What law there is is n't worth talking about; it is negligible when it is n't positively silly. A man who steals a horse is quite

aware of the fate that awaits him if captured; he suffers the penalty made certain by custom. It is n't murder, according to the code which governs such matters.

"Brannon did n't see the incident as you saw it, though no doubt he had some idea of how you felt. And possibly he irritated you by his habit of secretly laughing at one. Brannon is a real man, Jo."

She gave Josephine a reassuring hug, then laughingly patted the crimson cheeks.

"Don't you dare feel bad about it," she warned. "I 'm glad it turned out that way. I did n't order Brannon to hang Artwell, though I knew Brannon was going to catch him if possible; and if I felt any emotion at all over the prospect it was a sort of dumb acquiescence in the customs that govern such matters.

"But I 'm glad now, Jo, really glad you saved Artwell. The main fact is that he has gone, and that is what we wanted. I think he will not bother us again. I 'll bet Brannon feels the same way about it. Now you sit right down in the rocker while I get the horses. We are not going to have our ride spoiled by such a silly incident."

Later, mounted on Chesterfield, staid, dependable, and accompanied by Betty, who rode a spirited bay horse, Josephine was conscious that she was

startled by her friend's charity of judgment as applied to Brannon.

Betty's standards, she felt, were rather elastic, in that they admitted Satan Lattimer to her favorable consideration upon the basis by which she judged Brannon.

Both, Betty had said, were real men. And in the same breath she had drawn a vivid word-picture which had flatly contradicted the statement, especially with regard to Lattimer.

"Brute" was one word that had gone upon Betty's canvas as a daub of character into the verbal picture. "He is a devil," had been added to it; followed by "He 's handsome, terribly, darkly handsome . . . . ruthless, smiling devil . . . . would have been pirate." And then; "But he 's a man, Jo; every inch of him . . . . he dominates. They are real men" (thus she had included Whitman and Brannon, getting them into the picture with Lattimer), "bonnie men of muscle and brawn and steel and fire. I like them—even Lattimer, who would not hesitate to carry a woman away to the mountains."

Josephine was n't sure that she understood Betty after all. Was she to assume that Betty's standards were at variance with those already accepted by the world—standards that had been vindicated by time, and under which all human conduct had been appraised and valued? Or was she to believe that despite Betty's frank description of Lattimer's

scarcely admirable predilections, she had discovered in him qualities of character that would entitle him to be accepted by the world as a "real man"?

And what about Brannon? He too, according to Betty, was a "real man." Was he like Lattimer? And had Betty merely omitted to mention his charming manners out of consideration of the fact that he was her father's range-boss?

Or was Brannon different? Josephine thought not. She was convinced that various wild and vicious impulses were concealed behind Brannon's formidably smooth, steel-like exterior, and that only time would reveal them.

Was that why she was curious about the man, why there reigned in her mind at this instant a desire to stay on at Betty's ranch, a desire to stay that she might watch him betray himself as the wild man she knew him to be?

"Betty," she said, after a while, when there came a pause in her friend's chatter, while the two horses were breasting some tall saccaton grass at the bottom of a wide depression, "how old is Brannon?"

"Twenty-seven," replied Betty. Out of the tail of her eye she glanced at Josephine, and her lips took on a queer firmness, as though she was repressing some disturbing emotion.

"He looks older," remarked Josephine, after an interval of silence.

"Do you think so?" inquired Betty, calmly, again glancing swiftly at her friend.

"It 's the wind and the sun that have made him look so bronzed and rough, I suppose; and the hard life that has made his eyes seem so—so unflinchingly steady. I hate him, Betty!"

"Uh-huh," returned Betty, inexpressively.

Josephine did not see the cynical curve on Betty's lips.

CHAPTER V

JOSEPHINE had brought away from the Whitman cabin one distinct impression, which had haunted her day and night during the two weeks that had elapsed since her visit—that the ruggedness of the country accentuated Mrs. Whitman's fragility.

Mrs. Whitman was the mother of Ben Whitman —the latter one of that trio of men eulogized by Betty during Josephine's first days at the Lawson ranch—a slight, tragic-faced woman who bore her affliction in stoic silence. For two years she had not been outside the walls of the Whitman ranch-house, and her welcome to Josephine had been pathetically eager, as was also her insistence that Josephine should come again, "very soon."

Josephine had promised, but the second visit was as yet in prospect because Betty Lawson had been very busy—too busy to go "gadding," she had frankly told Josephine—and Josephine would not make the journey alone.

For into Josephine's heart had crept a new awe of the country, an awe of the grim strength that seemed to be everywhere around her, that seemed

to encompass her when she moved, that oppressed her with a sense of her own relative weakness and aroused a consciousness of futility.

Strangely, when she paused to attempt to analyze the sensation, she did not know where to begin. For she was aware that everything she saw affected her with its grim, rugged strength. The cattle she watched were tall, gaunt creatures of leathery muscle, wild-eyed, irritable, who could run as fast as a horse. The horses were tough, shaggy, evil-tempered beasts that seemed eternally to combat restraint of every character. The men she had seen were silent, grim, self-sufficient, seeming to reflect the spirit of the country; they looked like bronze images of a prehistoric race with their weather-beaten faces and their serene, steady eyes. And every man wore deadly weapons which, she was certain, he would not hesitate to use.

The poisonous life that had come under Josephine's observation had filled her with a dread of doing any walking whatsoever. Loathsome creatures that wriggled and crawled and hopped had come into view from places most unexpected. On the ride to the Whitman ranch Betty had pointed out some of the lurking denizens of the waste land to her. A diamond-back rattler coiled in the shade of a mesquite-tree; a scorpion in the lee of a flat rock; a horned toad, rigid, gray, hideous, staring unblinkingly at the horses, impudent, defiant.

Josephine shuddered as she stood this morning at the edge of the lower veranda of the ranch-house watching the progress of a dust-cloud that traveled steadily northward through the basin. Ahead of the dust-cloud was the Lawson buckboard, and in the buckboard were Betty Lawson and a cow-boy.

Betty was on her way to Willets for supplies of a varied character. It was a trip that Josephine had declined because of its attendant inconveniences; namely, the heat, the dust, the monotony of travel by such primitive methods, and Willets itself, which she had disliked at sight on the day she had descended from the train to the town's tumble-down station.

But with Betty's departure a heavy lonesomeness had settled over the ranch-house, and Josephine half regretted that she had not accompanied her friend. She watched the progress of the buckboard through the basin with a regret that was strangely mixed with apprehension; and the farther the buckboard drew away the deeper grew her conviction that she should have accompanied Betty. Betty's comforting presence had had the effect of rendering vague and formless the menacing, lurking dangers that seemed everywhere around her; with Betty going away those dangers seemed to draw nearer in inverse ratio to Betty's progress away from the ranch.

But Josephine was not a coward, even though

the smile she gave the surrounding country was slightly stiff-lipped and mirthless. The dangers she had apprehended must be largely imaginary, since Betty had survived them.

Her smile grew. Inside the house she could hear Chong, the Chinese servant, rattling pots and pans. The sound cheered her, brought her mind abruptly back from the realm of fancy and imaginary dangers. Chong had been the only human being in the ranch-house with Betty since Betty's parents had gone East, some weeks before Josephine's arrival. And apparently Betty had been unharmed.

Still Josephine was conscious of a strange disquiet which was almost premonitory. She felt terribly alone, oddly depressed. And yet she knew positively that Chong was inside the house and that Brannon was in the little shack—the foreman's cabin—which stood on a little level not more than a hundred feet straight west from where she stood, and in plain view.

Brannon was the only occupant of the foreman's cabin—Betty had told Josephine that—and he was inside of it now; for not more than ten minutes ago, from a window, Josephine had seen him entering. And she was positive he had not gone out for—she admitted it with a blush—she had watched the door rather expectantly.

She knew the bunk-houses were empty, for at breakfast Betty had told her the outfit had departed

before daylight to spend a few days on the open range, southward, searching for calves and such other stock as they might find unbranded.

Betty had said nothing about Brannon staying behind. Josephine's explanation for his presence was that perhaps some other duty had delayed his departure. She wondered if Betty knew Brannon had not gone with the other men.

Occupied with that thought, her gaze wandered toward the bunk-houses. There were two, situated side by side, within fifty feet of the bank of the shallow stream spanned by the corral. The low, rambling building used as a cook- and mess-house stood near the bunk-houses. The three buildings were not more than two hundred feet distant.

Twice before she had looked at the bunk-houses, and had seen no signs of life about them. Now, as she gazed, she saw a man come into view from around a corner, stand for an instant facing her and then sit down leisurely upon a bench that stood close to the wall of the building.

The man had walked with a pronounced limp, as though he had suffered an injury to a foot or a leg. But the marvelous clarity of the atmosphere brought his features before her distinctly, and she recognized him as the dark man who had whispered to her that day beside the railroad track—the man who had aided her in freeing Les Artwell, the horse-thief.

CHAPTER VI

NOT until she saw the dark man did Josephine realize that at least part of the vague dread which had afflicted her after Betty's departure had been aroused over the knowledge that Brannon had not gone with the others. She knew now, however, that her instinctive distrust of Brannon and possibly her hatred of him had invited the strange depression that had seized her. In no other way could she explain her relief over the fact that Brannon was not the only man at the ranch-house.

She had no faith in Betty's rather extravagant recommendation of Brannon. She had never been in the habit of accepting friends or acquaintances upon a basis so precarious, and she did not intend to begin now. She would choose her own friends, judging them by her own standards.

To be sure, there was prejudice, which must be considered; but she was certain that in spite of the unfavorable impression she had formed of Brannon that day beside the railroad track she would have disliked him. She was certain she would always dislike and distrust him, for she did not care for

men who had the disturbing habit of seeming to look through one.

From the first, Brannon's eyes had offended her. They were so steady and steely and so irritatingly calm, so serenely mocking in their blue depths, that they had aroused in her a violent antagonism. She was certain that they masked various wild and reckless impulses such as Betty had tacitly ascribed to him when she had compared him with Satan Lattimer—and in the next breath to declare that Lattimer would not hesitate to "carry a woman to the mountains."

The dark man had impressed her more favorably. In the first place, the dark man seemed more human. There beside the railroad track, when he had whispered to her, he had betrayed passion—excusable passion, because Brannon had been about to hang an innocent man. Also, the dark man disliked Brannon, which fact seemed to establish a bond between the dark man and herself.

At any rate, if she was to trust to her always-reliable intuitions, she must pin her faith to the dark man. She did n't intend to be very friendly with the dark man either, but she had a certain curiosity that must be satisfied. And so, unhesitatingly yielding to the urge of impulse, she stepped down from the veranda and walked to the bunkhouse.

The dark man got up at her approach. His

movements were awkward, but she thought he achieved his bow with some grace, considering an injured foot, which was heavily bandaged and which apparently would not bear his weight.

Also, there was a respectful glow in his eyes, and his voice was flatteringly deferential and gentle.

"So it 's you, ma'am," he said. "I thought you 'd gone with Betty Lawson."

"You did n't see me standing on the porch?" she asked, for she was certain he had seen her.

"Just a minute ago?" He smiled. "I reckon I did. Until then, I thought you 'd gone with Betty. I did n't see her go, though I knowed she was goin'. I 'd been in the bunk-house nursin' my foot."

"How did it happen?"

"Busted it ropin' my hoss this mornin'. I reckon it ain't bruk—twisted bad, though—so 's I couldn't drag it with the boys. Tough luck."

"Have you heard from Artwell?" she asked, guardedly.

He grinned widely. "Yep. Les is safe. He sent word I was to thank you. You done him a good turn, ma'am. Artwell never stole no hoss from anybody!" He looked at her intently, searchingly. "You ain't mentioned to Brannon that I cut Artwell loose?"

"Certainly not!" she declared.

"That 's right," he said, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "If Brannon was to find out about

that deal he 'd make things mighty unpleasant for me."

"I will never tell him!"

"Don't like him, eh?" he said, a touch of passion in his voice. "Well, there 's lots of folks don't like him. He 's a lot too fresh."

She did n't want to discuss Brannon further. She talked of the corral, the horses in it, of the country, and of the feeling of awe the contemplation of it gave her.

He watched her curiously, evidently a trifle puzzled, though plainly amused when she told him she was afraid of the very bigness and strength of everything.

"Don't bother me that way," he grinned. "I reckon that 's a new one on me. Never heard of anybody bein' scared of mountains an' draws an' trees an' flats an' such. Don't they raise such things in the East?"

Of course, after that, she knew he lacked imagination. She felt a slight disappointment, though she consoled herself with the thought that she had heard persons rhapsodize over big cities though she herself was so familiar with their wonders that she had ceased to marvel at them.

"I 'll send Chong down to attend to your foot," she said, turning to go.

"Shucks; you won't," he said, quickly. "It ain't nothin' to get excited over."

"Denver *has* been hurt worse, Miss Hamilton," came a drawling, slightly mocking voice from the corner of the bunk-house nearest the ranch-house.

Josephine wheeled stiffly to face Brannon.

He was standing at the corner of the bunk-house, his legs sprawled apart, his arms folded over his chest, and the fingers of the right hand were caressing his chin. She had seen him in that position the day she had rescued Artwell, just before he had discovered the escape, while he had been standing on the track with the other men watching the departure of the train. The position was characteristic of his saturnine, mocking, and self-sufficient attitude toward his fellow-men.

He evidently had been listening. How she hated him!

"Of course you would n't care for Mr. Denver's foot!" she said, her eyes blazing with scorn. "Men who eavesdrop are too self-centered to do things for the unfortunate."

"Mr. Denver is n't unfortunate, Miss Hamilton," he said, placing broad emphasis on the "mister." "A trifle awkward, perhaps. Getting a twisted foot just at this time keeps him from helping the other boys with a tiresome, dirty job—branding on the open range."

"It seems Mr. Denver is n't the only man who is avoiding a tiresome, dirty job!" she said, pointedly.

"That 's so. Maybe I stayed behind to keep Denver from being lonesome."

Brannon was apparently unaffected by Josephine's sarcasm. If he felt any emotion at all, it was deep, invisible. The glance he threw at Denver was oddly vacuous, foreshortened; it was as though he did not see the man at all.

Denver, Josephine noticed, was sitting tense, his muscles straining. His lips were in a pout; his black eyes were agate-hard and glittering with fury.

But it was a fury Denver was trying hard to suppress. It seemed to Josephine that he knew he must suppress it, that he feared to yield to it.

Also, she felt Brannon was secretly enjoying Denver's struggle to control himself; she was vaguely aware that some sort of a contest was going on before her eyes—something secret, subtle—an underplay of terrific, primitive forces.

As when she had seen Brannon the day she had rescued Artwell, he seemed to dominate, was serenely confident of his ability to command, to control any situation that might arise. She felt again the metal-like inflexibility of him, and as before the formidable smoothness with which he clothed it irritated her. She was determined to sting him into exhibiting passion of some sort.

"Does Betty Lawson know you are evading your duty?" she demanded.

"I don't know what Betty is thinking right now," he returned.

"Oh, I presume that is one way of reminding me that what you are doing is none of my business?"

"Did Betty tell you I was to report to you?" he asked, his gaze steady as it caught and held hers.

She laughed scornfully, in a vain effort to suppress the fury seething in her veins. She was conscious of defeat. She somehow got the odd impression that her words were like hailstones striking a metal roof; they rattled but had no visible effect upon the solidity of the structure.

But she made him see the hatred in her eyes; she had that small satisfaction. And she was certain the contempt in her manner when she turned and walked away from him must make him realize how insignificant an atom he had become in her estimation.

That thought persisted until, reaching the veranda, she glanced swiftly back.

Brannon was facing her; he had evidently been watching her. Quite plainly she could see his face. He was smiling.

Josephine went into the house, into the living-room, where she stood, her face flaming as she yielded to the rage that had seized her—a rage which she knew was caused by the knowledge that in Brannon she had met a man whose will was stronger than her own.

CHAPTER VII

JOSEPHINE spent the remainder of the day in the big living-room, brooding over her clash with Brannon. She was too angry to read any of the books whose covers peeped so alluringly at her from the shelves of the big bookcase that stood against the west wall between a low open window and the outside door; she was too irritable to sew or to retrim the spare hat she had brought, which she could have made more fascinating with little effort.

Little pleasures and tasks of that character seemed trifling when arrayed against the event of the morning. Life—big, vital, elemental—was more interesting.

Her face still flamed when after lunching in the dining-room with the little, almond-eyed Chong attending to her wants, she returned to the living-room and stood for an instant peering out of the west window.

Denver and Brannon were not visible.

Josephine selected a book and went out on the veranda, where she dropped into a rocker and tried to read, to get her mind off Brannon.

The book was dull, uninteresting. She closed it noisily. Her brows were level and her lips in straight lines as she sat staring into the northern distance at the upward sweep of the great green-brown bowl with its splotches of brilliant green and its contrasting stretches of gray and level alkali flats.

She meant to conquer Brannon. She would show him that she was not to be intimidated by his overmastering self-conceit, by his studied indifference to the wishes and the desires of others, by his absurd pretensions to unassailable authority, or by his ridiculous self-assurance. She would teach him that he could not—

At this point her thoughts became incoherent. The green-brown bowl became a blur, an opaque sea. Josephine was crying.

Later she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and bit her lips in vexation, though her shoulders, still moving convulsively, testified to the intensity of her emotions. Her hatred of Brannon had grown bitter, savage, and its strength gave her a vindictive joy, because once while she had been crying she had been on the point of conceding that she felt miserable because she liked Brannon in spite of his indifference to her.

The afternoon had waned when she got up and went into the house.

Chong was preparing supper, and he smirked

engagingly at her as she entered the kitchen.

"Gettee pletty lonesome," he said. "Missy Lawson makee plenty noise."

Josephine was lonesome, far more lonesome than she cared to admit. She went to her room, and when she came down Chong had the cloth laid. By the time she had finished eating the world had darkened, and from the veranda the mighty basin seemed to be enveloped in sinister shadows.

Twilight continued until the last, piercing rays of the sun vanished from the peaks of some tall mountains on the horizon, and then suddenly the basin vanished in a black pall and Josephine could only dimly make out the shapes of the foreman's cabin and the bunk-houses.

She went into the living-room and lit a lamp.

Half an hour later, hearing no sound from the kitchen, and surmising that Chong had gone to bed, she got up and walked to the door, afflicted with a dread premonition that some one was prowling around the house. She intended to close the door and had grasped the knob when a dull, heavy drumming sound reached her ears.

Poised, ready for instant flight, she listened. The sound came closer, became more distinct. A horse—galloping.

She drew a breath of relief, aware that her nerves had been at an unusual tension. The coming of a horseman probably indicated that one of the men

of the outfit had ridden in, perhaps to make a report to Brannon, who had stayed behind "to keep Denver company."

Her lips curved scornfully at the thought; but instantly straightened again when she heard the thunder of hoofs at the edge of the veranda—and the words, hurled at her ears out of the windless void:

"Hullo! Any of the boys here?"

"Why—no— Yes. That is—Denver and Brannon."

"Good!" There was satisfaction in the voice—a voice that was gruff and deeply masculine. Josephine's eyes now accustomed to the outside darkness could see the dim shapes of man and horse.

"Lets me out!" Came the voice again. "I 've got troubles of my own, an' I 'm in a hell of a hurry. Been to Laskar. Comin' back I looked in at Ben Whitman. His mother 's sick—got a fit or somethin'. Ben wanted me to ride to Willets for the doc. Told him I would if there was n't nobody here to send. That 's all; I reckon I 'll drag it!"

"Wait!"

In the sudden excitement that assailed her, Josephine had gone out upon the veranda and was half-way to the horseman when she uttered the command.

"Talk fast!" growled the horseman, impatiently.

"Is Mrs. Whitman very ill?"

"She 's sick, ma'am; that 's all I know. I got a look at her, an' she was pretty peaked. Sufferin' bad. You 'd better have Denver or Brannon cut it. So-long, ma'am."

There was a flurry of hoofs, an indistinct shape hurtling through the night, and the horseman had vanished.

For an instant Josephine stood motionless on the veranda helplessly undecided and profoundly agitated.

Brannon must go of course, for Denver could not ride thirty-five miles with an injured foot.

She supposed Brannon was in his cabin. She peered at it through the darkness and saw a narrow streak of light issuing from one of the windows. Apparently Brannon had not heard the horseman, and much as the idea offended her she supposed she would have to go to his cabin to apprise him of what had happened.

She was at the edge of the gallery when she became aware of a moving shape at a little distance out into the darkness.

"Brannon?" she said, sharply.

"It 's me, ma'am—Denver," came the latter's voice, low and smooth. "I heard a hoss, an' a man talkin'. I seen him slope. Reckon he was in a hurry to get somewheres, eh?"

"It 's about Mrs. Whitman; she 's very ill. The man who was just here told Ben Whitman he 'd

stop here and have some one go to Willets for the doctor. I suppose your foot—"

"It 's in mighty bad shape, ma'am—an' painful. I 'm a heap sorry, but if—"

"Get Brannon then, will you please? And do hurry! The poor woman may be dying!"

"Brannon's here," came the latter's voice from somewhere in the outer darkness. "What 's the ruckus? Who is dying?"

"Mrs. Whitman. A man rode past just a minute ago. Mrs. Whitman needs a doctor!"

Brannon loomed out of the darkness, mounted the edge of the veranda, and stood where the faint glow of light from the open doorway shone on him.

Josephine thrilled oddly at sight of him. It was as though a cool, calm breath of the night swept over her, stilling her excitement, soothing her jangled nerves. She knew it was the man's magnetism —gripping her, drawing her, holding her—the intense, vital, resistless force of him that she had felt all along.

She hated him because he possessed the power to dominate, to control every situation without apparent effort, naturally, as though there was no other way. She hated him because she felt he knew just how she fought against the lure of him; she hated him just as bitterly for mentally acknowledging that despite her hatred for him he had intrigued her interest.

She meant to control this situation, was determined to show him that she resented his calm assumption of power and authority.

Denver had limped his way to the veranda. He now stood near Brannon, in the light from the doorway. He was silent; his face was expressionless, though his black eyes were alert, his gaze roving from her to Brannon, and past her into the living-room. His foot was still bandaged.

"Brannon, I want you to ride to Willets for a doctor!"

Josephine's voice was cold, authoritative, though she was aware that in it was a hint of vindictiveness.

She was also aware of the dead silence that followed her words. For the first time since she had known Brannon she detected emotion in his eyes. She saw them narrow with a pin-point of sardonic derision; saw his lips curve slightly, as with grim amusement. The expression was transient, subtle, and before she could fix it clearly in her mind for future consideration it had gone, and he was watching her calmly, attentively.

"I think you do not understand, Brannon," she said coldly. "Mrs. Whitman is very ill and needs a doctor at once. While you are standing there doing nothing she may be dying!"

"There is nothing wrong with my hearing, Miss Hamilton," said Brannon. "But I want to remind

you that I am still issuing orders for the Triangle L. One boss is all that any ranch needs. Denver will go for the doctor. While he 's there the doc can fix up his foot."

Josephine's first sensation was that of acute shame and mortification. The shock, her astonishment, the incredible fact that Brannon had dared say such a thing to her, dismayed her, brought on mental incoherence.

There followed a surge of furious rage and resentment so violent that it took her close to Brannon, so close that inches separated them when she spoke, and her blazing, scornful eyes were swimming with contempt unutterable.

"I wonder if you realize how much I hate you, Brannon," she said steadily, despite the tumult of passion which had seized her. "I want you to know it. I want you to know that I chose you to go for the doctor because I did n't want to be alone with you. I hate you, despise, and distrust you! And if Denver rides for the doctor I shall go with him!"

Brannon's level gaze had not wavered. She saw a faint smile flicker for an instant on his lips, saw his eyes deepen with a subtle meaning that she could not comprehend. Then he said shortly, "That seems to be plenty"; turned, stepped off the veranda, and vanished into the darkness in the direction of the corral.

CHAPTER VIII

DENVER said nothing after Brannon went. He turned, peered after Brannon until the latter could no longer be seen; then limped to the edge of the gallery and seated himself, leaning comfortably against a column.

Josephine did not move. She stood where Brannon had left her, rigid, still furious, but feeling a vicious satisfaction over the consciousness that she had told Brannon exactly what she thought of him.

Brannon had not said he would go; but when she heard hoof-beats from the direction of the corral, gradually diminishing into the distance, she realized that she had won.

Still she did not move for a long time, though she strained her eyes in an effort to see Brannon riding away. But an impenetrable curtain of darkness hid Brannon from view.

In an effort to quiet the turmoil of conflicting emotions that seethed within her, Josephine walked to the far end of the veranda, eastward, where she stood for a time staring into the darkness. Her emotions were a curious mixture of humiliation, rage, and regret.

She kept seeing Brannon's face when he had stood before her on the veranda. She tried to read the strange smile that had appeared on his lips when she had acquainted him with her real feelings toward him; she endeavored to analyze the subtle something that had been in his eyes.

She was convinced that he had not believed her when she had told him she hated him, for the smile on his lips and the light in his eyes had betrayed him.

Nor had he seemed angry or hurt. He had been amused; that was it. But the amusement had been grim, as though he possessed knowledge of a sort that would astonish her if he chose to tell her of it, knowledge of something secret and clandestine, of tragic or threatening import.

She stood for a long time at the eastern end of the veranda; how long she did not know. But she started after a while, aware that she had been completely engrossed in her mental picture of Brannon's face. Over the eastern rim of the mammoth basin had come a big, full, yellow moon; and she was bathed in the rich, mellow, effulgent glow.

The veranda was flooded with golden light. Far out in the basin toward Willets the golden flood stretched, sweeping the ridges and hills and touching the flats with subdued radiance.

She did not wonder that she could not see Brannon; she must have stood at the veranda end for

more than half an hour, and Brannon would have gone many miles.

Still she searched the northern slope of the basin for sight of him and sighed distinctly when she failed to see him.

Brannon's cabin was now in plain view; it was clearly outlined; and one window, where she had observed the light streak immediately after the rider from Whitman's had gone, reflected the huge, golden disk swimming above the horizon behind her.

Denver, she saw with a feeling of satisfaction, was still sitting on the edge of the veranda, where he had gone after the departure of Brannon. It was evident that Denver meant to remain in the vicinity of the ranch-house until Brannon returned.

She spoke to Denver as she reached the door on her way to the living-room, asking him if he had seen Brannon.

"No," he answered slowly; "I reckon he must have drug it."

The expression "drug it" meant no doubt, that Brannon had ridden fast. She wondered how long it would take a good rider—Brannon, for instance —to reach Willets; and she speculated upon Ben Whitman's ability properly to care for his mother until the arrival of the doctor. Thirty-five miles! That meant seventy miles altogether. It also

meant that Mrs. Whitman's sufferings would last many hours.

Entering the living-room, she stood for some minutes beside a big center-table, thinking of Mrs. Whitman, of the woman's white, tragic face and her big eyes, eloquent of suffering and filled with the reflection of heroic patience.

She looked at the comfortable chairs in the room. They invited her, but looking at them she saw duty beckoning. It was ten miles to the Whitman cabin, and the trail was tortuous to one unaccustomed to riding; but she had not been standing at the table for many minutes before she became aware that she had decided to go to Mrs. Whitman.

Denver would know the trail, and Denver could be depended upon.

She turned, intending to go to the door and ask Denver to get the horses ready.

Denver was standing in the doorway.

He was standing on one foot, the injured foot resting lightly on the threshold of the doorway; his arms were braced against the jambs, the fingers of his hands outspread in a way that made Josephine wonder at the bigness of them.

A change had come over Denver. At the bunk-house that day his manner had been respectful, deferential. Now he seemed curiously bold and familiar. His attitude expressed impudence. His

lips were slightly apart in a loose, whimsical, wanton smile; his eyes were hard as agate and gleaming with a passion that she had not seen in the eyes of any man.

CHAPTER IX

IN Josephine's eyes Denver had become invested with a new personality. He was at this instant the material agent of those invisible dangers which had threatened her since her first day at the Lawson ranch. He was danger itself, evolved from her vagrant imagination; he was the fulfilment of the dread promise that the waste places had held out to her. In his eyes glowed the cruelty of the country; in his manner was a ruthlessness that the grim, rugged strength of the land had suggested to her.

She understood now that she had made a mistake in not permitting Brannon to send Denver to Willets. Brannon was the man she really trusted, but she had permitted her foolish prejudices to influence her. She knew, too, that Brannon had been aware that she was making a mistake; it had been that knowledge, secret and clandestine, that she had seen in his eyes when he had stood before her on the veranda. Brannon knew what kind of a man Denver was, and he had wanted to apprise her of that knowledge. That was why he had rebuked her, why he had insulted her with his cold statement that

the Triangle L did not need more than one boss.

As this conviction burst upon her she felt her knees weaken, and for an instant they threatened to give way under her.

Denver must have seen some evidence of the doubt and dread that were torturing her, for as she watched him, her eyes slowly widening, her face paling, she saw him grin hugely.

"Ketchin' on," he said. "I was wonderin' if you understood what Brannon meant. Did n't give it a thought, eh? Used him like a dog. That 's a woman for you. They ain't got no sense, which is why men have such an easy time with 'em. If you go to gettin' fresh with me I 'll guzzle you! Understand?"

She was not more than three or four paces from him, and when she saw him move forward she was certain that he could not mean to harm her, despite his menacing manner, for she knew Chong was in the house; and she had heard Betty say that Chong was as much a man in a fight as any of the cowboys in the outfit, that he was gentlemanly and brave and dependable.

But she did not want to call to Chong; she did n't want violence in any form, and she had a hope that Denver would not press her too far.

She delayed retreating until Denver had taken two steps toward her, for she had been thinking that his injured ankle would retard his movements;

and if he really did mean to harm her she would have no difficulty in evading him until she could call to Chong.

She could not believe that any man would dare meditate the thing that plainly was in Denver's eyes.

She gasped when she saw that he used the injured foot as well as he used the other. The realization came tardily, for as she at last moved backward Denver reached out a long arm and grasped her right wrist, jerking her violently toward him.

For an awful instant she was too stunned to struggle, though her astonishment was greater than the fear she felt.

Denver laughed.

"You 're sensible," he said; "it ain't no use fightin'."

It was evident that he took her passivity to mean that she had surrendered, whereas she was merely quiescent until she could gather her strength and her senses into some sort of coördination, until she could get back the breath that seemed to have left her.

Then she screamed and suddenly braced her hands against Denver's chest, pushing him from her with all her strength.

Miraculously, it seemed, the movement freed her.

For Denver's muscles had suddenly become limp.

She heard him catch his breath with a great gasp, saw his face whiten and his eyes widen as though he were staring at some dread apparition.

She forgot she was free. In her astonishment she stood motionless, watching the miracle of the man's sudden transformation. For he was now cringing away from her, seemingly trying to contract his body, apparently striving to hide his bulk from somebody or something behind her. She saw his hands slowly rising, the fingers spread wide, the palms toward her.

As she wheeled her thoughts went to Chong. The man had vindicated Betty's confidence in him; he had come at just the right time.

Chong was not behind her. Framed in the open window between the bookcase and the corner, one hand holding back the lace curtains, a heavy pistol rigid in the other, was Brannon.

Josephine stood motionless, rigid. She was glad, unutterably glad to see Brannon, and the shuddering, dry, gasping sobs that shook her were born of gratitude too great for words.

Yet she did not change her position, for there was no mistaking the light in Brannon's eyes. He meant to kill Denver.

She could feel Denver behind her; without looking at him she knew he was cringing, concealing himself as much as possible from the grim death at the window.

He had come at just the right time

An instant before the appearance of Brannon, Josephine's passionate hatred of Denver had been so great that she would have yielded to an overwhelming yearning to take his life if she could have laid her hands upon a weapon. Now, with Brannon framed in the window, and satisfied beyond all doubt that she was safe, there came a swift reaction. For the knowledge that Brannon was near seemed to take the tragedy out of the incident, made it seem commonplace, trivial. She felt now that the only significance she could attach to the affair was the shock to her self-esteem—ashamed consciousness that she had almost become a victim of Denver's passion.

She no longer wondered why men in this country had applied the sobriquet "Steel" to Brannon. His face, in the light from the lamp on the center-table, seemed to have been molded from that metal. She felt she could see the gray-white inflexible texture of it beneath the bronzed skin. His lips were in straight, hard, rigid lines, and his eyes were pools in which glowed lights and points of fire that fascinated her; they coalesced, deepened, became definitely centered upon her own. She drew a deep breath of mingled awe and wonder.

"Step aside, Miss Hamilton," came his voice, cold with authority, though strangely without passion; "I 'm going to kill that yellow coyote behind you!"

She did not move. She meant to save Denver. Not that Denver did not deserve death for his attack on her, but because the thought of violence was repugnant to her, because her objection to the principle of unauthorized death-dealing was as strong now as it had been in the case of Les Artwell. If there was a perverse passion in her heart that would not permit her to yield to Brannon's will it was betrayed in the defiant look she gave him.

"You sha'n't kill him; I won't have it!" she declared. "Why are you always so eager to kill some one? Is there no other way to punish men for crimes like—this?"

She saw Brannon's hard lips curve into a curious, mirthless smile, and at the same instant she felt Denver move swiftly. Assailed with a sudden presentiment that Denver intended to shoot Brannon, she turned just in time to grip his wrist as he drew at the pistol at his hip.

Fighting to prevent him from drawing the weapon, she heard a slight sound at her side and a man's bulk loomed close; an arm flashed by her face with incredible swiftness, the sleeve brushing her face, burning into the flesh as it passed. She saw Denver reeling away, his eyes closed, his knees sagging, his arms hanging limp.

She watched Denver go down, flat on his back near the south wall of the room, lax, unconscious;

and with the swift glance she took at him she saw a bruise and a trickle of red on his forehead.

When she turned, Brannon was standing close by, looking down at Denver. Brannon's heavy pistol, the barrel gripped tightly in his right hand, had proved an effective weapon.

Josephine did not speak, and Brannon did not look at her, though the girl watched him, awed, fascinated by the repressed fury that showed in his pale face and in his blazing eyes. As he stood watching Denver, the girl sensed the terrible force of Brannon's passions; she felt she was seeing Brannon as men knew Brannon.

She feared he would complete his work, and when Denver began to show signs of returning consciousness she stepped toward Brannon, intending to prevent further violence. She halted, though, when Brannon, without looking at her, waved a deprecating hand in her direction, as though to say he knew what was in her mind and that he had no intention of bothering Denver further.

In silence they watched Denver rise, swaying unsteadily—a beaten, whipped, sullen beast masquerading in man's shape.

When Denver at last succeeded in straightening himself against the wall, Brannon spoke, breaking the silence of the room with the curt order: "Denver, thank the lady!"

He waited, watching cynically, while Denver stepped forward and muttered something unintelligible. Brannon's lips twitched when Josephine turned her back upon the man.

Josephine did not change her position until she heard Denver cross the veranda, until she saw Brannon walk to the window, part the curtains, and look out into the moonlight. When Brannon finally turned from the window and looked at her with a dry, quizzical smile, she knew that Denver had gone; and she sank into the nearest chair, weak, nerveless, almost hysterical.

Brannon expected her to faint or go into some form of hysteria; and when she sank into the chair and sat there trembling, her hands pressed tightly over her eyes, he smiled with slight contempt. The heave and tumult of her bosom revealed to him how desperately she was fighting to retain her self-control.

Headstrong, he thought her; obstinately wilful. She rather deserved her present punishment for disregarding his orders regarding the sending of Denver to Willets and for her determination to oppose him.

He had little respect for the aggressive spirit she had exhibited, even though since the first day she had occupied a prominent place in his thoughts, and he had been haunted by her eyes and her hair, and

captivated by the firm, white curves of her chin and throat.

She was beautiful, distractingly beautiful; and were it not for her aggressive self-reliance and her apparent devotion to the principle of doing as she pleased without regard for the desires of others, he might have yielded to certain amorous impulses instead of almost succumbing to a malicious desire to antagonize her.

The last was a satanic impulse tempered with pity. As he watched her now he felt sorry for her, though he was aware of a yearning to remind her of several things that had not rested well on his mind—for one thing her frank declaration that she despised and hated him.

But though there was malice in his heart toward her, a force that made his pulses pound heavily drove him to her side. Before he was aware of what he was doing he had placed a hand on her bowed head and was stroking the wonderfully soft hair; was watching with grim pity how her slender shoulders shook and quivered from the intense emotion she was experiencing.

But though tenderness surged through him, the malicious devil dominated, drove him to gentle, mocking speech:

"You trusted the wrong man, eh?"

Somehow it seemed the most natural thing in the

world for Brannon to stroke her hair, even though no other man had ever attempted it. And Brannon would never know how his touch calmed her, how it made her pulses leap. It was as though through his finger-tips she could feel his strong personality tugging at her. Still she resented the touch, was furious with herself for tolerating the familiarity. And yet the touch thrilled her. She was conscious of a vicious satisfaction when he spoke, taunting her because of her faulty judgment; she felt a thrill of delight over the prospect of quarreling with him.

"Please stop pawing my hair!" she said coldly. "And I don't think you are very gentlemanly in calling attention to the mistake I made! How was I to know? You certainly did not seem to be very trustworthy, with your miserable habit of looking at one without seeming to see one. And if you had n't been so superior and aloof perhaps I should have—should not have spoken as I did when I was talking to you on the veranda!"

She had got out of the chair and was standing beside it. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were brilliant with passion; she was rigid, defiant, and her satisfaction over the fact that she was having it out with him was apparent.

Brannon also was enjoying the clash. But his enjoyment was deeper, secret. He presented a calm exterior, masking his emotions, which were

varied, though centering upon the malicious thought that he had betrayed her into exhibiting temper.

"You 've learned something, Miss Hamilton," he said; "you 've learned that a man does n't always mean what he says. I was trying to make you understand that it was n't safe to leave Denver at the ranch with you. But you were determined to have your way."

"Indeed! How am I to believe you? How did you know that Denver meditated what—what he attempted?" Her eyes were alight with scorn.

"I know Denver. His foot was n't hurt. I stayed at the ranch to-day because he stayed. I knew he was up to some deviltry. I was pretty close when Callahan of the Star stopped here to-night; I 'd been hanging around, keeping an eye on Denver, when Callahan came."

"Callahan?"

"Callahan was the rider who told you about Mrs. Whitman. The Star is beyond the rim of the basin."

"Oh!" she exclaimed astonished to discover that while she had sat in fancied security in the ranch-house, this man had anticipated her danger and had taken steps to protect her. She was grateful, and yet she was disappointed to learn that her obligations to him did not end with his opportune appearance at the window. Watching him, she got the impression that he was omniscient and possessed of

an uncanny power to anticipate events; that he had reason to have confidence in himself; that he was a deep, subtle thinker with a certain, unerring comprehension of human nature. For an instant she was afraid of him; alarmed that his knowledge of herself included a suspicion of her reluctant admiration of him, which she had not admitted to herself until her passive acceptance of his caress a few minutes ago.

She had not meant to admit that she admired him; she was angry at herself because she had been weak enough even to entertain the thought. Until the instant she had felt his hand on her hair she had assured herself that the appeal he had made to her was in the nature of a perfectly natural respect for his strength, such as one might feel for any man who betrayed mental qualities that would distinguish him from the ordinary. In her mind he was merely a symbol of the country; he had taken on the attributes of his environment—the rugged strength, the sinister, prepared readiness of the land to betray its grim promise of death and violence, the lurking threat, the secret, cynical knowledge of irresistible power. Perhaps she felt that one day Brannon's strength would break down her reserve, that her will, fighting his to the last—as it was fighting now—would yield to his. She did not mean to surrender to him. The mastering, elemental strength he had revealed whenever her will clashed with his;

the grim, ruthless potentialities lurking behind his smooth, metal-like exterior; the crudities of life in this section of the world; the naked threat of cruelty that was borne to her upon every breeze that swept her face—all these she shrank from. Surrender, even in the slightest degree, would mean she would have to face the alternative of giving up the things that had become dear to her—the joys of civilization, the delight of living among people whose natures were as her own; the companionship of men and women whose destinies were woven with her own; the refinements, the gentle things of life; material things—bathrooms, electric lights, the gay, animated streets, theatres, dances, ball-games, midnight suppers, and the wonderful atmosphere of it all—all exclusively Eastern.

In the light of life as she had known it, and in the alluring picture she now drew of the smooth, calm, pleasurable life of the future, Brannon, despite his rugged strength and positive magnetism, despite the fact that the lure of him had seized her, was not worth the sacrifice, even if she were seriously to consider falling in love with him.

She was glad to know that deep in her heart she still hated him; she felt a vicious satisfaction over the conviction that she got a vindictive joy out of disagreeing with him, in mocking him.

"So you were spying," she said. "And you saw

the rider—Callahan? And you heard what he said to me, I suppose?"

He nodded.

"Then when you came to the veranda and asked me what was wrong, you were merely pretending that you had n't heard."

"That 's it."

"Why did you pretend?"

"I wanted to get a chance to tell you to send Denver to Willets."

"But I did n't send Denver," she smiled, triumphantly. "I sent you. Why did n't you go?"

"You know why."

"But what about Mrs. Whitman?" she inquired sharply.

"I sent Chong."

"Chong!"

His eyes narrowed at her start of surprise.

"Then," she said, accusation in her voice, "why then, you must have been near the house all the time, even when Denver—" She paused and looked sharply at him.

"Yes," he said, answering the question in her eyes; "I saw it all, from the window, from behind the lace curtains."

"Then why did n't you—why did you permit him to—to—" She broke off, her face flushing with indignation.

"When a woman says she hates a man—"

"Brute!" She stood rigid, her hands clenched.

"And despises him—"

"Coward!" Her eyes were glazing pools of scorn.

"And deliberately sends him away while she keeps a yellow coyote near her, to protect her—trusting him, and making the other man feel—"

"O coward! Coward!"

"Like he does n't seem good enough even to walk on," Brannon continued, as though he did not hear her scathing epithets, "it was about time to permit the coyote to demonstrate his trustworthy qualities."

She did not answer, but stood facing him, scorn ineffable in her manner.

"Nor was it her first offence against the despicable tyrant," went on Brannon dryly. "One day, beside a railroad track, she placed her faith in the coyote, to the extent of taking his word concerning the innocence of a horse-thief."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, astonished.

"Denver talked, Miss Hamilton; such men can't keep secrets. He told a crony in Willets, and it got to me. There was a whispered conference between Denver and the lady—a compact to get Artwell on the train. The lady was very clever, delightfully clever. I know that. Also, I have known for some time. I knew it when I reported to Betty Lawson. But I did n't tell the whole truth in that report."

"But you will now, I suppose?" Her face was flaming with the red tinge of shame.

"You know better, I think," he said slowly.

He saw a signal of distress in her eyes; they were filling with guilty embarrassment, while color slowly came and went in her cheeks. She took a backward step and rested one hand on the center-table, glancing downward, her lashes on her cheeks.

"Good night, Miss Hamilton," came Brannon's voice.

She heard his step as he crossed the room, and looked up in time to catch a glimpse of his back as he went out of the doorway.

CHAPTER X

BRANNON had taken only two or three steps on the veranda when he heard the girl's voice coming sharply, peremptorily, through the open doorway behind him. He halted, turned, and went back, coming to a pause in the doorway, where he looked inquiringly at her.

She was sitting beside the center-table. Her face was very white and her eyes were wide with concern.

"Yes?" said Brannon.

"Brannon," she said, "where are you going?"

Her voice was low, tense; but Brannon's sharp, probing glance at her left him puzzled to account for her evident agitation.

"Why, I said 'good-night,' Miss Hamilton. I don't remember that I thought of going anywhere in particular. I've some accounts to look after—then, bed."

"Are you sure that you weren't thinking of anything else?"

"Pretty certain."

She drew a deep breath and watched him with steady, searching eyes that were alert to catch the faintest sign of insincerity in his own.

"You seemed to be in such—such a hurry," she said, haltingly. "I—I thought, perhaps, you had something—er—definite in mind. Had you?"

"I think not." His interest was aroused, though he concealed it from her. It had become evident to him that she had a deep motive in questioning him regarding his intentions.

"Won't you sit down just a minute?" she asked. "I have something to say to you."

He removed his hat, crossed the room, and seated himself in a chair near her. He watched her in silence—an amused, cynical silence.

To his astonishment she sat erect in her chair and leaned toward him, and he saw that she was in the grip of some intense emotion.

"Brannon," she said, "when you went out of that door you intended to find Denver. You meant to kill him!"

"I reckon not."

"Brannon, don't lie to me. You did mean to kill him; I saw it in your eyes!" She was vehement, positive.

Brannon was silent, watching her steadily, wondering what he had done to betray his intentions to her. He had thought he had concealed his impulse.

"There!" she said; "I knew it! Brannon, I won't have it! Understand?"

"Denver deserves to be killed."

"He does n't!" she denied. "That position is

indefensible; it isn't lawful. Men are punished for the things they do and not for the things they attempt to do. What may have been in Denver's mind I do not know; the fact is that his only offense was in seizing me."

"Out here we judge a man by his intentions, Miss Hamilton. Denver deserves to be killed for what he had in mind."

"Then why didn't you kill him earlier in the day, Brannon? You say you knew what he meant to do?"

"How could I kill a man you trusted, Miss Hamilton? I had to let Denver show his hand or you would not have believed him to be—what he is."

"We shall never get at it, of course, Brannon," she said, realizing that she was to blame for the entire affair, and that if Brannon had come to her to voice his suspicions about Denver she would have accused him of unwarranted interference. However, though she had made a mistake, she meant to prevent the killing that, plainly, Brannon meditated.

"We can't understand each other because we have different conceptions of the rules that govern us in our attitude toward our fellow-men. Violence in any form is inexcusable; it is founded upon fear, cowardice. Cowardice, Brannon," she repeated, when she saw his eyes narrow as he watched her. "I believe that is what really makes you Westerners carry pistols. You are afraid some one contem-

plates shooting you, and you are prepared to shoot first. That is fear, is n't it?"

"You 're doing the talking, Miss Hamilton," he said dryly.

"Oh!" she said, mockingly, irritated by his tone; "I presume you don't know what fear is?"

"I 've been afraid."

"Indeed!" She was slightly disconcerted, for she had expected him to deny that he had ever experienced the emotion; but she meant to gain her point.

"So Steel Brannon has been afraid," she taunted.

He smiled thinly, and she had a fleeting impression of contempt behind the smile.

"Yes," he said, evenly.

"Oh!" she said; "so you admit it?"

She was conscious of failure, of defeat in the effort she had made to induce him to betray a very human impulse to boast. Through that weakness she had meant to triumph over him; she had intended to prove to her own satisfaction that he was much like other men she had known.

Brannon was different. As he sat there silently watching her, not even replying to her final taunt, she was oppressed with an overpowering conviction of his absolute invulnerability to attacks that would have brought confusion upon most men. She knew his strength was in his unaffectedness, in his simple directness, and in his lack of conceit and vanity. He was like a metal structure, undraped, rigid,

towering, revealing every linking beam and section.

Yet she was determined that before he left the ranch-house she would get possession of the huge weapon that reposed in the holster at his hip. She was certain he intended to kill Denver.

She got up and stood in front of Brannon, looking down at him with a calm smile which was a mask for the tumultuous emotion seething within her.

"Brannon," she said, "I am not going to permit you to kill Denver. I want your pistol!"

Brannon rose. He kept his gaze on her as he got to his feet; and though his eyes were gleaming with cold contempt, she held his gaze until she was forced to look up at him. And she stood her ground afterward, rigid, her eyes fighting the silent battle she had brought on—a battle she meant to win.

When she saw Brannon's lips curve with a wayward, whimsical smile she knew she had won. And when he slowly drew the big, somber-looking weapon from its sheath and laid it on the table near her, the startled gasp that she succeeded in smothering told her she had not really expected to win.

A fierce exultation seized her. This iron-nerved man, feared and respected by other men in the section, was surrendering to her, was tacitly acknowledging that her will was stronger than his. It was a victory for the principle she had defended, a triumph for her personality.

After placing the pistol on the table Brannon stepped close to her and stood for an instant looking at her. Her senses groped helplessly before the enigma of his gaze. In his eyes she caught glimpses of varied expressions, none of them dominant, that they might be singled out and set aside for analysis. She was baffled, confused; and while she stood there she heard his voice:

"There 's the gun, ma'am; I reckon you like Denver more than I do!"

Then, before she could reply to the caustic remark that accompanied his surrender, he had turned and was walking out of the doorway.

She stood pale and silent until she heard him cross the veranda floor; and later, still standing where he had left her, she could hear his step on the hard, barren sand of the level surrounding the ranch-house.

At last, trembling, elated, and strangely thrilled, she turned, drew a chair to the table, and dropped into it, resting both elbows on the table while she stared at the huge, deadly weapon whose muzzle gaped threateningly at her from the white cloth upon which Brannon had laid it. Shuddering, she reached out a hesitating finger and turned the threatening muzzle in another direction.

Her satisfaction over the victory was strangely mingled with malice. From the first Brannon's inflexibility had challenged her, had irritated her.

She had felt that exercise of the power of life or death over a fellow-being had become the ruthless and domineering impulse of his nature. Other impulses had been revealed later. He had been despotic—toward her. Worse, he had humiliated her by calmly disregarding her desires in several instances; and by his cool aloofness toward her he had disparaged her importance as a member of the human family.

Contemplation of his past offenses against her made the present victory sweeter. She had won! And hereafter she would show him that—

She started, gripped the edge of the table; holding on while with white lips she held back a scream that caught in her throat and died in a startled gasp. In the grip of an icy paralysis that held her to the chair as though she were shackled, she turned her head until she faced the open door; and she sat there, staring into the square of moonlight, nerveless, voiceless.

A pistol-shot, sharp, crashing, had shattered the deep silence of the night. And while she sat there, unable to move or speak, she heard the sound reverberate and die away, carried on the slight breeze that swept the mighty basin.

And then came a silence, strange, portentous, sinister in the uncertainty it brought to her. She sat, cringing away from the open door, afraid, dreading, listening, waiting.

CHAPTER XI

NO sound reached her ears. The silence of the great world beyond the open door seemed to press in upon her, to encompass her, to oppress her with a mighty weight that threatened to crush her. Through the door she could see the diamond-glitter of the stars against the soft blue background of the sky; she caught a glimpse of a distant mountain peak, bathed in the golden radiance of the moonlight; the velvet-green of trees and grass and bushes in the luminous haze was marvelously vivid; some bare, rugged rocks that were within range of her vision glistened white and clean, like giant pebbles washed by the tides of ages. Even the hard, sun-baked sand of the ranch-house yard looked smooth and inviting to her, for at this minute she was aware that she had erred in thinking she had been afraid of the country.

The country was beautiful. In the clear sweep of moon-touched landscape was the immutable calm that reigns where man is not. Man only, driven by his desires and passions, was to be feared. Selfish, self-centered, arrogant with his puny power,

man strove against man while nature looked on with inscrutable mien.

Josephine, too, like the men she had feared, had yielded to impulses aroused by selfishness. She had named her selfishness "principle," but she knew at this instant that the world meant only that she had wanted to have her own way. It had been a lust for power which had driven her to strive for control of Brannon's actions; and she had sent him to his death merely because she had wanted to show him that her will was stronger than his.

The luminous outside world swam mistily in her vision as she stared at it; and suddenly the scene was blotted out altogether and she crossed her arms on the table-top, rested her head on them, and yielded to shuddering sobs of remorse and terror.

Denver had killed Brannon; she was certain of that. For she had sent Brannon out, unarmed, knowing Denver still had the pistol that he had tried to draw when he had seen Brannon at the window. Brannon had been sacrificed to her ridiculous prejudices against firearms. She knew at this instant that her attitude had been shamefully narrow, that since all Westerners carried deadly weapons Brannon was forced to carry one also, merely as a means of self-defense. Now she could solve the enigma of his gaze as he watched her after placing his pistol on the table; the dominant expression had

been a sort of reckless contempt that she had dared him.

She shrank from a mental picture that flickered for an instant in her vision—that of Denver speeding the shot that had killed Brannon. There was no doubt in her mind that Brannon had received the deadly missile as he had received her dare, with the cold composure that characterized all his actions.

She shuddered and sobbed aloud, beating her clenched hands futilely upon the table-top, cringing farther away from the picture her imagination conjured—Brannon lying in a pitifully huddled heap on the hard sand of the yard, Denver slinking away into the night.

But Denver would not run away; with Brannon dead he would remain, to—to—

"Here 's another concession to your principles," said a cold, mocking voice at her elbow.

She did not look up. Her convulsive start at the sound of the voice was succeeded by a great joy that left her weak and nerveless. For the voice was Brannon's; and when she did not look up he continued dryly: "It 's Denver's; I took it away from him."

A heavy metal object was laid gently on the table in front of her, and by moving one of her arms slightly she was able to see that the object was a pistol.

Now, as when Brannon had rescued her from

Denver, Brannon's voice soothed her. But she refused to raise her head, because she was reluctant to let him see that she had been crying.

"Go away, please!" she said in a muffled, unsteady voice.

"Certainly." His voice was dryly humorous, though strangely unsteady, like her own.

She waited for him to go, and when she heard no sound she thought that perhaps he had gone as he had come, without her being aware of it.

She raised her head, to see him standing close, his arms folded over his chest, the fingers of his right hand gently caressing his chin. The attitude was reminiscent of the railroad track and the incident of Les Artwell.

The quizzical, mocking light in his eyes brought on an irritation that helped her mightily to regain her composure, though as she defiantly met his gaze a wave of color mounted to her cheeks. Enjoyment of her victory over him had been premature; as in every clash with her thus far he had emerged the winner.

If he had betrayed some sign of elation over his victories she believed she would not have cared—so much. But his cold, calm, matter-of-fact attitude, which seemed to imply that victory for himself was inevitable and foreordained, aroused in her a furious resentment.

"I told you to go away!" she said.

"I heard you, Miss Hamilton."

He moved closer to her; so close that the leather chap of one leg brushed her skirt. She sat rigid, wondering, resentful.

Then his right hand came out, the fingers gently but firmly grasping her chin, and her head was forced slowly back until she had no choice but to meet his gaze—which she did with flashing, scornful eyes.

"Crying!" he said.

Her eyes were swimming with passionate hatred because he had dared to do what he was doing at this instant, though she yielded to the oddly submissive impulse that she could not have explained, and sat there looking up at him when she might have escaped by rising. She did not answer but merely glared at him.

"Thought Denver had been shot?" he said.

"No!" she denied, sharply.

"Me, then?" he said gently. "Oh, don't! There was n't any danger that Denver would shoot me. If you 've been worrying about me you 've been wasting time. Denver never shot anybody when the prospective victim was looking at him. And I never give a man like Denver a chance to shoot me in the back. Denver did n't like it a little bit when I ask him for his gun—when I told him guns were n't popular with the new boss. He pulled it right handy and let it off once before I could

take it away from him. He was shooting at the moon. But you should n't have cried about me. You don't like me enough for that, do you?"

"I hate you!" she declared.

He laughed softly and released her, stepping back and bowing to her. And he said no word to her as he walked to the door. But when he turned on the threshold and looked at her she knew he had not been deceived; that he was aware that her anger had been a spurious passion, masking—consciously or unconsciously—her real feelings toward him. She could tell by the amused gleam in his eyes that he knew she had been crying because she feared Denver had killed him, that he knew she was fighting against surrendering to him, and that the knowledge that surrender must finally come was goading her to a pretense of hatred which was founded upon a consciousness of her own weakness.

CHAPTER XII

WHILE Brannon had been talking to Josephine he had taken his six-shooter from the table where he had laid it after yielding to the whimsical impulse to surrender it to the girl. As he stepped down from the veranda after leaving the big room where Josephine still sat at the table, his mood was saturnine, almost savage. He had spoken lightly to Josephine of his taking Denver's gun from him; as a matter of fact the action had been featured by a bitter struggle which, though short, might have ended disastrously for him had his eyes not been alert and his muscles vigorous.

Denver had concealed himself in a little lean-to adjoining Brannon's shack, and when Brannon passed the building on his way to the door of his house, Denver had confronted him. Denver's six-shooter was drawn; Brannon's at that moment was lying on the table in the big room of the ranch-house.

Denver had witnessed the surrender of the weapon to Josephine. Standing there in the shadow of the lean-to he told Brannon about it. Denver's malignant joy over the thought that he had caught his enemy unarmed was so great that it made him reck-

less. He felt impelled to gloat over Brannon before he killed him. But the delay cost him the victory. He pulled trigger at Brannon's leap toward him, but Brannon's hand touched the weapon, deflecting the bullet, which seared Brannon's side. When Denver came to, he was lying on the ground near the door of the lean-to. Brannon was standing over him, gently caressing the knuckles of his right hand.

"Our new boss don't want any killing, Denver," said Brannon without mirth, "that 's why you are getting off with a life that a coyote would n't be proud of. Fifteen minutes ought to be plenty. If you have n't pulled your freight from the Triangle by that time the new boss's orders won't go. Get going!"

The fifteen minutes alloted to Denver had passed when Brannon emerged from the ranch-house. He did not step out boldly, for the moon was bright and Denver might have taken a notion to use his rifle. So Brannon slipped along the edge of the veranda and made his way cautiously around the ranch-house, coming into view a little later around a corner opposite the veranda where he stood for a time intently scanning the level space that stretched between the ranch-house and the bunk-house.

Denver was not visible.

Still, Brannon waited, for he knew the man; and if he had decided to depend upon a rifle, which

might be used to advantage from, say, a window of the bunk-house, he could make the little level an exceedingly dangerous place upon which to trespass.

Therefore Brannon permitted some minutes to elapse before he moved. Then he leaped for a giant cottonwood that stood at a distance of perhaps fifty feet from the ranch-house. From the shelter of the tree he again surveyed his surroundings. There was no sound, no movement. Still, Denver may have decided not to risk a shot; he might possibly be waiting until Brannon grew careless or less active.

Thus Brannon spent considerable time behind the tree, alert to every sound and movement. Presently he smiled and stepped away from the tree. Southward, perhaps half a mile, went a rider.

There was no doubt that the rider was Denver. The man's war-bag was behind him; above the war-bag the familiar outlines of Denver's back, shoulders, and head.

For a time Brannon watched; then went to the door of his shack, where he stood for an instant staring into the basin.

He had left a bracket-lamp burning in the larger of the two rooms of his dwelling, and in its light he stood for several minutes after leaving the door, meditatively gazing floorward, his thoughts upon the girl he had left sitting in the big room of the ranch-house.

"She 's like a bird beating its wings against a

pane of glass, thinking the glass is the open air. She 's getting nowhere and is kind of fussed up about it," he mused. "I reckon she 'd like me if she did n't hate me so much."

He was n't sure that he liked her. At least he pitied her—pitied her because he realized that if she attempted to alter the rules of life of the country into which she had come she must inevitably be disappointed. She had the spirit to defend her principles; and principles were all right when considerd as ideals, but most humans kept their principles in a hazy background while they continued to follow the whims of impulse. That was what made people human.

"She 's had her own way too much," was his next mental observation. "She 's trying to drag her Eastern environment out here, hoping to make ours over—whether we like it or not. She 'd be a pinhead if it was n't for—"

Her hair, he thought and her eyes, which were big and expressive, with depths that held all the charm and mystery and allurements that a woman's eyes may express.

"West is n't East," was his next thought-fragment. "If she 'd study her geography she 'd find that the Mississippi is West until you get west of it. And then there 's still more West, which is right about here. And none of it is Eastern. I reckon she 'll find that out; give her time."

He returned to the doorway and lounged in it, his gazed centered at a point in the southern distance. where went a rider who had become a mere dot in the luminous haze of the night. He was still watching the rider when he heard the dull, muffled crash of a pistol!

As the sound seemed to come from the direction of the ranch-house he ran in that direction, though since the door in which he had been standing faced west, away from the ranch-house, he had first to reach the southern corner of his shack before he got a view of the ranch-house.

And when he did see the ranch-house there was no sign of life outside of it. The two west windows were illuminated as they had been all evening; and light was streaming out of the door upon the veranda floor.

As he ran toward the house his concern was for the safety of Josephine, though he could not understand why she should be in danger, unless some night wanderer had reached the ranch and finding the girl alone—

He was on the veranda before the thought could take complete form.

Standing in the open doorway, one hand pressed tightly to her bosom, the other dangling limply at her side with a heavy six-shooter about to slip from her fingers, was Josephine. Her face was chalk-white, her eyes alight with helpless terror.

On the veranda floor, just at the edge of the light stream that issued from the doorway, lay the body of a man, queerly huddled, as though he had fallen face down and afterward had tried to get to his feet.

Brannon got that impression from the position of the man's right knee, which was drawn up, and from his right hand, which was close to the knee, limp and crumpled.

Brannon asked no questions, then. It was plain to him that the man had tried to enter the door and that Josephine had shot him down almost at the threshold. The position of the man's body and Josephine's agitation seemed to prove the soundness of his conjecture.

He took a second fleeting glance at Josephine as he stooped beside the man, to see that she had covered her face with her hands and stood leaning weakly against the door-jamb; then he examined a moist spot on the man's back, shook his head, and turned the man over so that he might look at his face.

The man had been shot in the back, the bullet penetrating the region of the heart. He was already dead.

When Brannon got to his feet after the swift examination his lips were in grim lines. The dead man was Tim Callahan, the rider who some time before had brought to Josephine the news of Mrs.

Whitman's illness. The Star was on the rim of the basin, eastward, and Callahan had evidently not gone far from the Triangle L when for some reason, which would probably never be known, he had returned.

Brannon thought he knew what had happened. Callahan had stepped upon the veranda without previously making his presence known to Josephine; and the girl, overwrought by the exciting events of the night, and thinking perhaps that the Star owner was of the type represented by Denver, had shot him down, possibly as Callahan, tardily realizing his danger, had turned to escape.

As Brannon reached his feet he saw the big six-shooter slip from Josephine's fingers and thud dully to the floor of the veranda. Josephine was in danger of following the weapon, for her eyes were closed and she was swaying limply when Brannon leaped and caught her in his arms.

He carried her into the big room, laid her on a spacious lounge, watched her for an instant with a sympathetic frown; then left her and picked up the pistol that had dropped from her hand.

A swift inspection showed him that two cartridges had been exploded. As the weapon was one he had taken from Denver he could account for one empty shell; the other must have been fired at Callahan by Josephine.

Brannon returned to Josephine, saw that she was

breathing deeply and regularly, though still unconscious; then he went outside to the level beyond the veranda. At a little distance from the ranch-house he saw a horse, riderless, standing with drooping head in the shadow of a juniper-tree. The animal limped when he led it out into the moonlight, and he saw that its left foreleg had been injured, sprained, he thought—a bad one. A crude star, branded on the hip, indicated the animal belonged to Callahan.

The injured leg explained Callahan's return to the ranch-house; Callahan had no doubt sought to get a fresh horse.

Brannon led the beast to the stable, intending after a while to return and care for the injured leg. When he reached the doorway leading into the big room of the ranch-house Josephine was sitting on the edge of the lounge. She was leaning back, her arms outstretched, her fingers gripping the edge of the lounge, and she was staring at the open door.

Evidently she had just recovered and was mentally reviewing what had happened.

When she raised her gaze to Brannon she looked wildly at him, shuddered, and said lowly, quaveringly:

"Is he—d-dead?"

At his grim nod, she covered her face with her hands and sat silent, swaying back and forth.

Brannon pitied her, But he could do nothing.

In killing Callahan she had violated the principle that she had so aggressively defended. Many years would pass before she would be able to forget tonight's experience; she would be tortured day and night by the vivid memory of what she had done; countless times the tragedy would be enacted in her mind; and remorse would bring its inevitable breaking down of her spirits.

Charity toward her and a wisdom that was his from experience told him that his best course would be silence, and so he said nothing as he walked to the center-table where, after inspecting it, he had laid Denver's gun. He picked it up and slipped it inside his shirt, fearing that she would become hysterical if she saw it.

For a time he stood silent, watching her, frowning savagely because there was nothing he could do to assuage the terrible grief that was convulsively moving her shoulders. She sat there, a pitiful little figure, frail, impotent, her former belligerence gone, cringing from her own thoughts. He would have given much to be able to take the blame for the killing of Callahan; but his taking the blame would not prevent her thinking of the tragedy. And that was what the future held in prospect for her.

She looked up at last and he saw that her eyes were wide with horrror as they met his.

"'Go away!" she cried passionately. "O my

God! how can you stand there so calmly and look at me like that? When—when that man—" She pointed toward the open doorway, beyond which lay the body of Callahan.

She shrank back, staring at Brannon with wide eyes, as though she were seeing new details of his appearance, as though at this instant he had become invested with a new personality.

"No wonder they call you 'Steel'!" she said, her voice almost a wail. She shuddered and closed her eyes as though looking longer at him would be unbearable.

"Go away—please!" she whispered hoarsely. "Please go—and—and take—him—with you. Oh, I can't stand it any longer!"

Brannon gave her a glance of concern and sympathy and abruptly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Josephine heard him moving about on the veranda; heard him as he walked away with heavy tread as though he were carrying something. Then she shivered through the flat, dead silence that had fallen.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER leaving Josephine's presence Brannon bore Callahan's body to his shack, where he stood for some minutes meditating upon the evil fortune that had befallen him.

There had always been a lack of cordiality between the men of the Star and the Triangle L outfit; a coldness dating back to a day when Lawson, Betty's father, and Tim Callahan had had a disagreement over range rights. Later Callahan and Brannon had had a clash of wills over the matter, and the Star owner had injected the personal element by speaking deprecatingly of Brannon's ability as range-boss. There had been witnesses to the meeting between Callahan and Brannon, and the witnesses predicted that Callahan's harsh words and Brannon's caustic, unyielding demeanor meant war.

War did not develop. So far as possible, Brannon and Callahan avoided each other, each, despite the enmity that had come between them, respecting the other for the manly, honorable qualities each detected in the other.

Yet word of their disagreement had gone abroad, and as always, rumor slyly and maliciously widened the breach between the two men.

The killing of Callahan on the veranda of the Triangle L ranch house could not be satisfactorily explained to the members of the Star outfit. It was known that Callahan was Brannon's enemy, and whatever explanation Brannon made men were certain to believe him guilty.

And Callahan had been shot in the back!

As Brannon stood in the big room of his shack staring down at Callahan's body, he kept seeing Josephine as she had sat on the edge of the lounge in the ranch-house—abject, terror-stricken, suffering untold horrors of remorse, her former calm self-possession gone, her spirit broken, her high principles forgotten, shattered—accusing her!

Brannon's face paled in sympathy for her.

"Hell's fire!" he said, savagely. "She 's been some fresh; but she has n't earned *that!* And I reckon Callahan ought to have had more sense than to scare her by coming upon her suddenly; as as he must have done to startle her into shooting him!"

His rigid lips curved into a mirthless smile as he took Denver's gun from his shirt. He removed one of the empty shells from the weapon, replaced it with a loaded one from his own gun, and then slipped the empty shell into the chamber from which he had taken the loaded one.

"That Star bunch is pretty mean," he reflected as he holstered his own gun and placed Denver's upon

a shelf near the bracket lamp; "they 'd devil her about it until she went loco."

He blew out the light, walked to the door, and stepped out, closing the door securely behind him. A few minutes later he emerged from the lean-to, where Denver had waylaid him, carrying saddle and bridle and rope.

He swung open the corral gates, caught up his horse, saddled and bridled him, and rode away eastward.

He had not attended to Callahan's horse; that task would have to await his return. As he rode he peered southward, but Denver had been out of sight a long time and Brannon felt reasonably certain the man would not return. Denver knew him well enough to know that he would keep his word.

Brannon's horse was the black he had ridden on the day of his memorable meeting with Josephine Hamilton. And as Brannon rode, his thoughts went to that first meeting and he meditated upon first impressions.

"Hated me from the start," was his thought, as he consulted his memory regarding Josephine's first level glance at him. "Her eyes had fire in them that day. Curious about her. Of all the women there she was the one that a man couldn't help looking at. Something about her to make a man take notice. Wanted her own way from the start. Well, I reckon it *would* stir an Eastern wo-

man, coming upon us like that, with us getting ready to swing Artwell off.

"I reckon she 's feeling pretty blue about now," he mused. "Principles busted, pride gone, courage plumb petered out. It 's a heap odd about a woman. When she's trying to show a little courage and authority to sort of impress a man and make him think she amounts to something, he 'll devil her to to get the notion out of her mind. Then she 'll blunder, or do some fool thing—which ought to make him poke fun at her—and he won't feel a bit like laughing. He 'll be sorry and play the fool for *her*—blaming himself. Then if she cries he 'll feel like a sneak and try to play the martyr—like I 'm doing."

He rode on, heading eastward, following a faint trail made visible by the moonlight. When the dawn came he was climbing the long, gradual slope at the far eastern edge of the big basin, going toward a group of buildings that were huddled together on a mesa.

An hour after sighting the buildings he was dismounting near one of them—a bunk-house.

His experienced eye had observed many signs.

Smoke was issuing from the chimney of the mess-house; the peculiar, acrid odor of a wood fire burned in his nostrils. A hoodlum wagon stood beside the corral fence, its rear flaps down. The "chuck-wagon" stood near it, denuded of supplies.

Three or four score of cow-ponies milled in the horse coral—the *remuda.* A bench outside the bunk-house was generously splashed with soapy water; and a roller-towel, limp and sodden, drooped from the wall above the bench. All about were scattered various articles—a miscellany of odds and ends of harness, wearing apparel, and riding equipment.

By these signs Brannon knew the Star outfit was in, and there was a gleam of saturnine humor in his eyes as he walked to an open doorway.

A dozen men diligently engaged at a long table ceased eating at Brannon's entrance. There was a concerted stiffening of bodies as Brannon was recognized, for the average cow-boy outfit is loyal to the authority to which it is allied, and all quarrels become the personal concern of each individual.

All gastronomic pursuits were placed in abeyance until Brannon stated his business, and at his short word: "I 'm looking for Cole Meeder," a tall man rose from the head of the table and walked toward the door in which Brannon stood.

The tall man was young. He could not have been more than twenty-five or six, but capableness was written convincingly upon his countenance. His mouth was large and mobile and strong; his eyes were deep-set, keen, and of a washed blue that gave them an eagle-like vacuity. He was tall as Brannon. In his gaze as he came to a halt and

looked at Brannon was mingled respect and hostility.

"Reckon I 'm going to spoil your breakfast, Meeder," said Brannon.

"Not my breakfast, Brannon. If a Triangle L man was to bust in on Callahan this way, why I reckon *his* breakfast would be spoiled. But Callahan ain't here now; he 's in Laskar."

"Callahan was in Laskar, Meeder. Just now he 's in my shack at the Triangle L."

Meeder started to smile; the smile died at its inception as he noted an almost imperceptible stiffening of Brannon's lips.

"Meanin' what, Brannon?" he demanded.

"Callahan is dead, Meeder."

Every muscle in Meeder's body seemed to leap into rigidity. His pale-blue eyes glinted with metallic hardness. There was a heavy silence, broken presently by a concerted movement as the men at the table left their places and moved forward, their faces expressing eager curiosity and suspicion.

Meeder had not changed position. But he heard the movement of the Star men and lifted one hand slightly, the palm turned backward, as a warning against interference.

"You 're tellin' us how Callahan, died, Brannon?" he said slowly.

"That 's what I 'm here for, Meeder. I killed him."

Meeder's breath was drawn, sharply. He gave no other sign of surprise or passion. But behind him the men of the outfit muttered, moved forward concernedly, and began to exhibit various indications of a hostility which would break at a word from Meeder, their range-boss.

Brannon was aware of the strain and the tension his words had provoked, though except for the mere hint of a wanton smile on his lips his face was as expressionless as Meeder's.

"I reckon if you was any other man we 'd swing you for that statement, Brannon," said Meeder presently. "But knowin' you as we do, an' rememberin' there was hard feelin's between you an' Callahan, we aim to listen to what you 've got to say before we move. You 're doin' the talkin'."

"There is n't much to it, Meeder. You 've heard how Betty Lawson's friend from the East helped Les Artwell give me the slip when I was aiming to swing him from a telegraph pole."

Meeder nodded; the other men moved closer. through various channels all the men of the outfit had heard the story, and much humor at Brannon's expense had featured their camp-fire talks.

"There 's one point that the gossips did n't see," resumed Brannon. "That point was Denver, Artwell's friend. Having eyes but mighty little brains when Miss Hamilton was talking to me there on the

railroad track, I was looking at her pretty much and not paying much attention to Denver.

"We had Artwell roped, right enough. Denver helped Miss Hamilton to get Artwell on the train. Denver fooled her; she thought he was straight goods, and she hated me for wanting to hang Artwell.

"Denver has designs on Miss Hamilton. He 'd been waiting until he got his chance. He thought the chance had come when the Triangle L outfit pulled its freight for the south range yesterday morning. Denver pretended to have a busted foot and would n't go with the outfit. Betty Lawson and Lin Murray drove to Willets, leaving Miss Hamilton behind.

"That seemed to make things pretty smooth for Denver. But I hung around, not trusting him because I 'd seen his foot was n't hurt. With me hanging around there was n't much chance for Denver to do what he was planning to do.

"But there 's always a hitch somewhere. Not long after dark I was keeping a cottonwood company and sort of watching the house to see that Denver did n't try any tricks, when Tim Callahan rode up to the gallery and called in to Miss Hamilton that Mrs. Whitman was sick and needed a doctor. Tim did n't stop long; he told Miss Hamilton he was in a hurry. He hit the breeze pretty lively when he left.

"After Tim went I had to show up. Denver had been hanging around close, sure enough. He got to the gallery about as soon as I did, and I aimed to send him for the Willets doctor.

"Miss Hamilton would n't hear of Denver going. Said she would n't think of sending Denver with that foot. She put it straight up to me, reminding me of how she hated me.

"Knowing what was in Denver's mind, I slipped around the house and sent the Chink to Willets, Denver and Miss Hamilton thinking I 'd gone.

"After giving me time to get a start toward Willets, Denver started things moving. I was watching him through an open window. Miss Hamilton would n't let me kill the polecat, so I gave him his time and fifteen minutes to pull his freight. He tried a gun-play which did n't work; so he packed his war-bag and headed south.

"It was all over—I thought. Half an hour after Denver left I was out making sure he 'd gone when I saw a man moving on the gallery of the ranch-house. Thinking it was Denver trying to get at Miss Hamilton again, I plugged him. Then I found out I 'd plugged Tim Callahan."

The silence that followed Brannon's recital continued so long that it grew oppressive. The Star men moved restlessly and cast inquiring glances at Meeder.

At last Meeder spoke, doubt and indecision in his voice.

"It sounds straight, Brannon." His eyes were steady, probing, and still hostile.

"Where was Callahan's horse, Brannon?"

Brannon told him how he had found the animal standing under a tree, lamed.

"That sounds straight, too," admitted Meeder. "But I reckon we 'll be takin' a look at Callahan's horse. Where is he lamed?" he asked suddenly.

"The left foreleg," returned Brannon," at the knee, I reckon."

Meeder looked long at Brannon before he spoke; and then his voice was non-committal, terse.

"Much obliged to you for ridin' over, Brannon. You tell a pretty straight story. The trouble is, Callahan ain't tellin' any. I reckon we 'll ride over to the Triangle L an' take a look at the ground— an' Callahan. You 'll be ridin' along with us, I reckon," he added, significantly.

Shortly a dozen Star men, lead by Meeder, who rode beside Brannon, skittered down the slope of the basin and headed toward the Triangle L.

Meager was the conversation that featured the ride, for in the hearts of all the Star men lurked a dark suspicion that Callahan's death had not come upon him in the manner described by Brannon. They respected Brannon as much as they could

respect an enemy of the man they had served, yet they had in mind always the memory of the ill-feeling between the two. So they spoke in monosyllables lest they betray their suspicions.

Brannon had made his lie sound plausible. He had constructed it on the ride to the Star, building it upon a structure of half-truths, and it seemed to him that it must serve the purpose for which he had devised it, that of diverting suspicion from Josephine, thus sparing her the agony of having to face Callahan's friends to undergo their insistent questioning.

Shortly before noon the Star men, with Brannon and Meeder riding ahead, swept past the Triangle L ranch-house and came to a halt at Brannon's shack, where they dismounted and filed inside. They stood, staring grimly at the rigid form on the floor while Cole Meeder knelt and made a somewhat prolonged examination of the body.

Meeder's eyes were blazing with cold rage when he finally got up and faced Brannon. His lips were curved in bitter mockery when he spoke:

"In the back! By God! You didn't take any chances, did you, Brannon?"

He stepped back, crouching a little, his right hand poised in a menacing curve above the butt of the pistol at his hip. His eyes were glowing with

passion; it leaped, cold and sharp, in his voice as he spoke to his men:

"You guys hold this man! I 'm goin' to the bottom of this! Tim Callahan did n't have a chance!"

CHAPTER XIV

FROM a window of her room on the second floor Josephine had watched the approach of the Star men. She had seen them when they were still a long distance from the ranch-house; but not until they were very close did she recognize Brannon, riding ahead, beside a tall, grim-faced man.

Josephine was not certain the men were from the Star until, when they came close to the window, she saw the large, crude brand on the hips of the horses. Then she shrank back from the window and stood with both hands pressed tightly to her bosom, breathing fast, dreading what impended, feeling certain that more tragedy would follow.

All night long she had lain awake, worrying about Brannon, wondering at the man's iron-like control of his feelings. Certainly when he had faced her in the big room after he had killed Callahan he must have felt some remorse over the crime, but in his face she had not been able to discern the slightest sign of emotion. He had been as icily composed as though his appearance in the big room had been in the nature of a formal call.

She was certain he had killed Callahan, though she knew nothing of the enmity that had existed

between them. The circumstances of Callahan's death all pointed conclusively to Brannon as the murderer. None but Brannon could have killed Callahan, for beside Brannon and herself there had not been another person within miles of the ranch-house. When Brannon had left, after placing Denver's pistol beside his own on the table, concern for Brannon had driven her to watch him from a window of the big room. From the window she had noted his oddly cautious movements as he crossed the level stretching between the ranch-house and his own shack, and she had seen Denver riding southward in the moonlight.

Afterward she had gone into the kitchen to bathe her eyes. She had heard the shot that had killed Callahan, and after a moment of dread suspense she had forced herself to go into the big room, where she had grasped Denver's pistol.

She had been standing in the doorway only an instant when Brannon appeared, six-shooter in hand. When she had picked up Denver's pistol from the table she had observed that Brannon's was missing.

Overshadowing all else in her thoughts this morning was the recollection of Brannon's cold unconcern over the murder. He said no word about it, had offered no explanation. His attitude had indicated that he intended to offer no explanation.

That was merely another example of his self-sufficient, contemptuous manner toward her.

When the Star men rode past the ranch-house she descended the stairs and ran to one of the west windows of the big room, where, from behind a lace curtain she saw the men dismount and vanish. Evidently they had gone into Brannon's shack.

Wonderingly, she waited; to her half-formed conjectures regarding the significance of the visit of the Star men there came no answer; though it seemed to her that Brannon must have had good reason to kill Callahan or he would not have dared to bring the Star men to his shack to view the body.

Perhaps Brannon had lied! Perhaps he had accused some other person of the murder; perhaps with his usual stoic indifference to the opinion of others, with his attitude of conscious superiority and power, he meant to deny all knowledge of the crime!

She knew the Star men would question her; her knowledge of the usual procedure of those in authority in murder cases (gleaned through the columns of newspapers) included a recollection of an inquisitorial examination of all witnesses. If the Star men questioned her could she testify against Brannon?

She felt she must tell the truth. To her knowledge Callahan had been innocent of wrong-doing. He had not even attempted to fight back, had not even drawn his gun in self-defense; for at the

instant her gaze had rested upon him as he lay oddly huddled on the veranda she had caught a glimpse of his six-shooter in its holster. Apparently Brannon had shot him down without warning.

Yet she could not answer the question she had asked herself. Brannon had treated her as he might have treated a child, and his attitude toward her had aroused her to a fury of resentment against him. Yet during Betty's absence he had protected her, risking his life when, unarmed, he had taken Denver's gun from him; and he had not taken advantage of her in any way.

"He 's a man," she told herelf as she stood at the window, breathlessly watching Brannon's shack. "Betty knew. He is a man!"

She knew now that she would lie for him, that she would never let the Star men hang him if she had to tell them—

She caught her breath at this point, setting her lips resolutely. And when she at last saw a man come around a corner of Brannon's shack and walk toward the ranch-house she left the window and went to the center-table, where she stood, fighting for her composure while awaiting the ordeal which was now inevitable.

For the man was coming rapidly, straight toward the house; she could hear his spurs whizzing as he mounted the gallery. He was the tall man who had ridden beside Brannon as the riders had passed the

ranch-house on their way to Brannon's shack.

When she opened the door in response to his knock his blue eyes were hard as flint and his lips stiff with passion. But he removed his hat with awkward respectfulness at sight of her, and his hard eyes seemed to soften a little with admiration.

"I 'm Cole Meeder, Miss—range-boss for the Star. I reckon you 're Miss Hamilton. Betty Lawson did n't get back from the Willets yet, I reckon?"

"I am Josephine Hamilton," she said, calmly. "No, Miss Lawson has not returned. You are a neighbor, are n't you? Won't you come in?"

"I reckon not." Meeder's voice was a tone lower. It was an added measure of respect. "You see, ma'am, this ain't exactly a visit, in the regular way. We 've come over to find out why Brannon killed our boss. I 'm askin' you what you know about it."

So Brannon had admitted it! That was Josephine's first thought. And he had evidently pleaded justification or Cole Meeder would not have asked what she knew of the killing.

She did not need to ask Meeder how he had learned of the killing; Brannon's arrival in company of the Star men indicated that he had voluntarily ridden to the Star. Though her curiosity was intense she dared not ask Meeder to repeat what Brannon had said to him in justification

of the deed. If she wanted to clear Brannon she must not hesitate or equivocate.

It took every bit of courage she possessed to meet the steady, penetrating gaze of Meeder's cold blue eyes. But she did it.

"Callahan attacked me, on the veranda. I was struggling with him when Brannon shot him."

She told the lie with an appearance of truthfulness, and with a vehemence that deceived Meeder; for after one sharp, suspicious glance at her his eyes filled with an expression of shamed embarrassment.

"I reckon that 's all, ma'am," he said thickly. "I did n't think it of Callahan. Brannon did n't tell exactly the same story; he stopped short of sayin' Callahan had attacked you. He just said he saw Callahan on the porch, an' thought it was Denver, come back. Wanted to keep you out of it, I reckon. I 'm a heap sorry I bothered you. That 's all, ma'am—except this. If I 'd knowed Callahan was that kind of a man I 'd never done any range work for him!"

Josephine stood in the doorway and watched Meeder walk away. She saw him disappear around a corner of Brannon's shack. Then she closed the door and went again to the window, where she saw the Star men climbing upon their horses. They rode to the stable, where one of them dismounted

and entered, to emerge an instant later leading Callahan's horse. Then all of them rode past the ranch-house, heading eastward toward the rim of the basin. One of the riders bore Callahan's body.

CHAPTER XV

IT had been part of Brannon's plan to apprise Josephine of the fact that he had lied about the killing of Callahan to save her the torture of a quizzing by the Star men. He would have told her of his intention before riding to the Star had he not feared she would oppose him and perhaps spoil his plan. And he had meant, after leading the Star men into his shack, to go to the ranch-house to tell Josephine what he had done and warn her to corroborate his story. Meeder's sudden rage upon viewing Callahan's body had spoiled the plan.

Standing in the presence of the Star men, Brannon realized that he presently would be enduring the jeers of the men, who would consider his attempt to shield Josephine a weakly heroic attitude by which he had endeavored to gain the lady's favor. Perhaps even Josephine would take that view of the incident.

Meeder and his men would not blame Josephine for the killing, conceding she told the story of the incident as Brannon had already visualized it; but her version would soon be told and retold, with various additions and embellishments, with the in-

evitable result that she would have to endure unpleasant notoriety.

He might have saved her that. Now he was doomed to accept in silence whatever gibes, venomous or otherwise, his friends and enemies should choose to hurl at him.

When Meeder returned Brannon was leaning against one of the door-jambs patiently waiting. Meeder halted in the doorway. His face was red with wrath over the discovery of Callahan's moral dereliction, his eyes were blazing with resentment against Brannon because the latter had not—according to Josephine's account of the murder—told the entire story.

"Brannon, your story don't gibe with Miss Hamilton's!" he snapped savagely.

Brannon met Meeder's gaze—held it. A faint, mocking smile tugged at his lips. But he made no answer. There was none to make. Of course, since Josephine knew nothing of his plan to shield her, she had told the truth.

"She admits you shot Callahan," Meeder went on, "but she says you done it because Callahan attacked her. Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

Watching Brannon keenly, Meeder was not able to detect the slightest change of expression on the other's face. Perhaps Brannon's eyes deepened with some baffling emotion; perhaps the mocking smile

on his lips became a trifle more pronounced. Meeder, who knew Brannon, was not certain.

"Meeder," he said gently, "maybe I did n't want you to know Callahan was that kind of a man."

The red in Meeder's face deepened. Shame, rage, and suspicion burned in his eyes. He took two or three steps into the room, gruffly ordered his men to carry Callahan's body outside and place it on one of the horses; then stood by silently until the men went out.

Brannon had stepped outside also, and when Meeder emerged he halted within an arm's length of the other. His voice was hoarse, vibrant.

"Callahan was n't that kind, Brannon. I 'm damned if I believe either one of you! There 's somethin' mighty fishy about the whole business, an' before I get through I 'm goin' to get the truth; an' don't you forget it!"

Not waiting for Brannon to reply, Meeder swung angrily around a corner of the shack and climbed upon his horse. Brannon watched the men until they passed the ranch-house; then he sat down on the threshold of the doorway of the shack, resting his elbows on his knees, and with his chin resting on his cupped hands meditated at some length upon the vagaries of woman's mind.

To be sure, he had been willing to take the blame for Callahan's death, and for that matter he was still willing. But what had been Josephine's motive

in accusing him of the crime? Had it been cowardice or merely a constitutional frailty of moral texture, which sought, involuntarily to escape blame?

There was a vast difference in her permitting him to assume the responsibility for the crime at his own suggestion, and her deliberately accusing him without his knowledge. And what could he think of those principles that she had so stoutly advocated?

As he sat there staring out into the basin he became aware of a dust-cloud that traveled steadily southward, toward him. When the cloud came nearer he finally made out the outlines of a buckboard which meant that Lin Murray and Betty were returning.

The buckboard was still a long way off, and Brannon had plenty of time to debate the question of having a talk with Josephine before Betty could arrive. Betty would have to be told of the killing of Callahan, and Brannon wondered if Josephine would stick to the story she had told Meeder, shielding herself from blame and fixing responsibility for the killing upon him.

He felt little inclined to talk to her; there was in his heart a malicious impulse to permit her to lie as much as she pleased, since her lying could do no harm other than to bring upon him the shame of being pointed out as the man who had shot an enemy

in the back. But he would carry the burden of that shame to shield her unless she chose voluntarily to confess.

He was at the corral gates when Lin Murray brought the tired horses to a halt, and he helped Murray carry Betty's purchases into the house.

Brannon had determined to give Josephine a chance to speak first; and so when once he was alone with Betty at the buckboard and she remarked that she thought it had been his plan to ride to the south range with the outfit, he answered shortly, though with a smile into her bright, inquiring eyes:

"Changed my mind. I had some accounts to check up. I 'm joining the outfit in the morning."

Later, lugging an armful of supplies and walking behind Betty, he almost ran into Josephine, who was crossing the kitchen. Several times while making trips from the buckboard to the house he had heard Betty and Josephine talking, though this was the first time he had seen the girl since the preceding night. And now as he almost brushed against her she flushed, averted her head and walked past him without looking at him.

The buckboard had been unloaded and Brannon was talking with Lin Murray—both men standing near the door of the mess-house—when Betty approached.

Her eyes were steady, inquiring, and held a glint

of perplexity as she walked to Brannon and stood close to him. There was a slight flush on her cheeks, and her lips had a slight belligerent curve.

"Brannon," she said, "where is Chong? I asked Josephine the same question and she told me to ask you. Well, I 'm doing it. Where is Chong?"

"I sent Chong to Willets for a doctor for Mrs. Whitman."

"Oh," said Betty, still perplexed. "I don't know what there is about the sending of Chong to Willets that would make it necessary for Jo to be so secretive. Do you?"

"No."

"Brannon, what on earth is the matter with you —with both you and Jo? Jo acts terribly odd; and I don't like you to drawl in that irritating way when you speak to me. How did you come to send Chong to Willets for the doctor? Who told you Mrs. Whitman was sick?"

"Tim Callahan rode by. He 'd been to Laskar and had stopped at Whitman's on the way back."

"You 've been alone here with Jo?" The color in her cheeks deepened with the question. She liked Brannon, and she certainly was not jealous of Josephine; but she was conscious of a queer constriction somewhere inside of her at the thought of Brannon and Josephine being the only persons at the ranch during her absence.

Brannon gave her a sharp, oblique glance.

"Denver was here until early this morning," he said.

"He is n't here now, though?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"I gave him his time this morning. He rode south."

"Why did you discharge him, Brannon?"

"We had a disagreement."

Ordinarily Betty would have been satisfied with such a statement; men came and went and there was never very much bother about the matter. But she had detected in Brannon's manner a constraint that had made her suspicious that he was reluctant to talk, and she was determined to make him talk.

"What did you disagree over, Brannon?"

"Nothing—much."

"Nothing—much," she said, mockingly, imitating his tone. "How remarkable! You have disagreement with one of the men over—over 'nothing—much', and you discharge him."

Murray turned his head and grinned into a hand; Brannon faced Betty, whose eyes were bright with determination and truculence. The girl's cheeks were tinged with a warm color; her chin was uptilted as she gazed at Brannon with a directness that would have been disconcerting to another man —but which brought into Brannon's heart a sudden

realization that Betty was prettier than he had thought and that she was much more wholesome and human in her anger than Josephine. Also, Brannon became aware of the bewitching curve of Betty's chin and the winsome lines of her mouth.

He was struck with the odd thought that he had never noticed her beauty; or if he had noticed it he had done so subconsciously, without half appreciating it. He was trying to think of an evasive answer when he saw Betty's eyes glow with deep, abashed light; saw her eyelashes droop; wonderingly watched the warm color already in her cheeks quickly suffuse her neck and forehead.

Puzzled, he looked quickly at Murray, thinking the latter might have caused the blush. Murray's back was turned. Brannon again faced Betty, whereat he saw deep scorn and mockery in her eyes: observed that her chin had come forward defiantly, and that her lips were resolutely set.

And then when his perplexed eyes met hers she laughed, shortly, tauntingly. But in the laugh was a note of elation; for though she had longed for it, this was the first time since she had known Brannon that she had seen the fire of admiration—for her—in his eyes.

"Nothing—much," she said, her voice a mere ripple of tantalizing, restrained mirth. "You don't feel like talking, do you, Brannon? And my questions bother you. And you don't want

me to try to make you talk, do you, Brannon?"

She turned abruptly and walked toward the ranch-house, leaving Brannon, more deeply puzzled than ever, staring after her.

"She was funnin' you, Brannon," chuckled Murray.

No answer from Brannon.

"I don't make no claim to knowin' why she was funnin' you, Brannon," went on Murray in a stifled voice. "But she was funnin' you about somethin', sure as shootin', sure as shootin'. But I reckon she knows. 'Nuthin'—much,'" he said, mimicking Betty's voice, "'nuthin'—much,' she says, ca'm as you please. 'Nuthin'—much'! Which she means is plenty—which you don't sabe!"

Brannon got rid of Murray by the simple expedient of walking down to the creek where he stood for a time trying to solve the puzzle of Betty's manner. He gave it up after a while and returned to his shack, where he sat for a time on the threshold of the doorway.

When he heard a sound at the corner of the shack he raised his head to see Betty coming toward him. Her face was pale, now; her eyes were serious.

"Brannon," she said after she had come close to him, "why didn't you tell me about Callahan?"

"I figured you'd hear about it after a while."

"Why did n't *you* tell me, Brannon? It is n't like you to dodge responsibility. You were talking to me a few minutes ago. Why did n't you tell me then, instead of waiting for Jo to do it?"

"She told you, eh?" drawled Brannon. He was wondering if Josephine had stuck to her original story—the story she had told Meeder.

"It was a shame to make her tell it, Brannon; she was almost hysterical. It must have been a terrible thing for her to have seen!"

"I reckon it could n't be helped," he said.

He knew from Betty's words, "a terrible thing for her to have seen," that Josephine had repeated the story she had told Meeder which, in effect, was that Brannon had killed Callahan while she looked on. He had decided he would corroborate anything Josephine said, and because he was still in doubt as to whether Josephine had mentioned that Callahan had attacked her, he hesitated to comment further.

Betty's next words indicated that Josephine had repeated her original version.

"I can hardly believe Callahan was capable of doing a thing like that, Brannon!"

Betty's clear, direct eyes were probing Brannon's, and lest she detect the insincerity in them he looked past her, into the farther reaches of the basin. Betty's eyes had always made Brannon feel slightly uncomfortable, especially when she looked at him as she was looking now, with a challenging

honesty that made him wonder at the clean purity of her thoughts.

"Brannon," she said firmly, "look at me!"

Brannon obeyed.

"Brannon," she said, "Callahan was shot in the back. Did you shoot him?"

He could have lied to her, but he knew he could not deceive her.

"You told me Miss Hamilton told you about it," he evaded.

"I want you to tell me, Brannon!"

"I 'm not doing any talking."

"Brannon, I want an answer!"

She saw his eyes glint with derision; a saturnine smile flitted thinly over his lips. She knew these things were signs of that unyielding quality in him that had earned him the sobriquet "Steel." In situations of gravest danger, where sheer courage alone was the one element that would save him, she had seen in his eyes the expression that was in them now; and she knew the futility of insisting.

Yet there was a calm serenity in her eyes despite Brannon's refusal to answer. Brannon was not "Steel" Brannon to her. She could remember the day, several years ago, when Brannon had joined the Triangle L outfit, and her idealistic first impression had been strengthened by the years. To her at that time he had seemed a hero who had ridden out of one of her well-thumbed romantic novels; and

though there had been disappointing revelations of character, which were the inevitable results of contrasting the real with the ideal, Brannon was still the knight of her girlhood days.

Which does not mean that she had failed to value him by the standard by which she judged other men; if anything, her practical common sense and her uncanny intuitive instinct had subjected him to tests that she would not have thought of applying to other men. She had watched him, studied him; had deliberately manœuvered him into positions where she could test the temper of the metal of his make-up, positions that gave her little intimate, illuminating glimpses of his character. She had searched and probed and peered at and prodded the mental structure of him, and in not one important detail had she found him lacking.

She knew him. The material from which he had been made was sound; he had no veneer, no exterior polished smoothness with which to conceal unpleasant imperfections.

But he never seemed to think of her except as merely Betty Lawson, the daughter of his employer. And of course until he did begin to think of her in another way she must not let him understand that for years she had been secretly wishing and hoping for a light in his eyes which would tell her that she was desirable. To-day she had seen that light, the dawning of admiration—an admira-

tion which was not quite sure of itself, an undeveloped, mildly astonished admiration. And then, coincident with the longed-for moment, had come Josephine's story of the killing of Callahan!

But her faith in Brannon had not been shaken. Therefore as she stood before him at this minute she was conscious of a serenity that dulled the exasperation she felt over his refusal to answer her question.

"I take that back, Brannon," she said, smiling calmly. "The Brannon I know does n't shoot people in the back; he did not kill Tim Callahan. Do you think there is enough grass on the southern range for the cattle, Brannon?"

Brannon's eyes glowed. Betty saw the fingers of both his hands slowly clench; saw his lips straighten into rigid lines, while his cheeks showed white through the deep tan upon them. For the first time since she had known him she saw him in the grip of some mighty emotion.

It was swiftly transient; had she not been keenly watching him she would not have detected it at all.

"I reckon there 's plenty of grass," he said. And again she saw in his eyes a gleam of that which had been in them some time before. And again he stood perplexed before the miracle of Betty's flaming cheeks and abashed eyes.

But only for an instant. Then she was walking toward the ranch-house.

CHAPTER XVI

HERSELF convinced that Brannon had sped the bullet that had killed Tim Callahan, Josephine's recital of the incident to Betty had been featured by a determination to tell the truth. As an extenuating circumstance she had repeated a possibility, suggested by Cole Meeder when she had undergone the trial of being questioned by the Star ranch-boss, to the effect that Brannon had mistaken Callahan for Denver. Thus she sought to assuage the keen horror suffered by Betty as she listened to the story.

Betty did not let her friend realize how the news of the killing had shocked her; and when Betty returned to the ranch-house after her talk with Brannon she did not again refer to the matter. Watching Betty furtively during the late afternoon and evening Josephine decided that Betty appeared rather unconcerned over the killing, which unconcern might be attributed to Betty's having been born and reared in a section of country in which most people betrayed a calloused indifference toward violence in every form.

Josephine of course was not aware of Betty's

knowledge of Brannon's character, or she would have been troubled over the perplexed expression of Betty's eyes whenever they rested upon her. Betty was wondering how much of the real story of the death of Callahan her friend had told, and she was entertaining a natural contempt for Josephine's secretiveness—a contempt which, despite Betty's mental denial of jealousy, was founded upon the conviction that somehow the killing of Callahan was connected with the rather clandestine aspect of Josephine's overnight stay at the ranch-house with Brannon.

However, Betty was Josephine's hostess, and her interest in her friend's activities must be limited by the requirements of courtesy; and Betty delicately forebore to question. As a matter of fact, she rather strained her patience to be polite to Josephine, and as soon as she decently could she went to bed, pleading weariness after the tiresome ride from Willets.

Josephine did not accompany Betty upstairs. Betty had spoken of meeting Chong in town during the early hours of the morning, telling Josephine she had sent Chong to the Whitman cabin for the purpose of bringing home news of Mrs. Whitman's condition after the doctor's visit.

Chong, Betty had said, would very likely reach the ranch-house long before midnight; and Josephine was anxious for the news he would bring.

After Betty retired Josephine went out upon the veranda and dropped into a rocker.

There was a big moon, and in its soft, mellow light the basin loomed vast and beautiful. But Josephine found herself watching Brannon's cabin, observing how the lamp-light streaked out between the window's shade and the sash, wondering about Brannon. Brannon must know she had lied for him, and yet he had made no effort to thank her when she had seen him in the kitchen during the day.

She found it hard to think of Brannon as a murderer, however. There had been something in the man's manner the night before that had puzzled her. She was sure she had seen sympathy in his eyes when he had been standing near the center-table watching her as she sat on the lounge trying to conquer her horror over the dread scene she had witnessed. Why should he sympathize with her? If any one needed sympathy it was himself!

And yet he seemed not to need it after all. In his eyes as he had stood there had gleamed the enigmatic light that had distinguished all his glances at her, though behind the light had been the old self-sufficiency and consciousness of power and authority that had so irritated her.

She was drawn to him even now, and she blushed when she remembered how she had thrilled at the touch of his hand on her hair, and how she had

vibrated to his voice when he had placed Denver's pistol on the table close to her head.

Had Brannon been an Easterner, had he been a product of that polite society to which she was accustomed, were he less uncouth and not so completely enveloped in the vital, rugged, and overpoweringly stern atmosphere of the country, she believed she could love him. Still she knew this reasoning was purely of the brain; while she was thinking her heart was saying, "I want him; I want him."

She got up, self-contemptuous because she had correctly interpreted the inner voice, and stepped down from the gallery. She walked to the eastern side of the ranch-house and stood there for a time reflectively gazing into the moonlit distance, aware of her hot cheeks and of the odd yearning that had seized her. Brannon's magnetism was not to be dispelled by mere reasoning!

A patch of level grass at a little distance south of the house attracted her and she walked toward it, reveling in the beauty of the night and filling her lungs with the marvelously sweet air, laden with the blended aromas that were carried to her on the breeze that blew against her from the unfathomed distances of this strange land.

To reach the grass patch she was forced to pass close to the stable; and when she heard a sound, seeming to come from the interior of the building, she halted irresolutely, almost persuaded to go back.

While she stood there she heard sound again, and fearfully turned to the big door from where, if danger lurked, it would have to emerge.

The door was half-open. In the aperture, clinging weakly to the jamb, swaying back and forth on unsteady legs, his head sagging almost to his chest was a man.

She wheeled, terror goading her, stifling the scream that leaped to her lips. But on the instant came the man's voice, low appealing:

"Don't, ma'am; I 'm hurt!"

She paused uncertainly. The man's words, "I'm hurt!" held a piercing, hopeless appeal. And the voice was familiar.

She again faced the door and the man, peered intently at his face, which was strangely white, almost ghastly in the moonlight; then she caught her breath and said sharply, breathlessly:

"Les Artwell!"

"It 's me, ma'am," came the answer, whisperingly. "I 'm hurt bad—shot. Don't make a fuss, for God's sake! An' don't run away from me, ma'am."

He lurched, sagged against the door-jamb, and went to his knees. In an instant she was beside him, frenziedly eager to help him, though as helpless in her excitement as he in his weakness.

He was certainly Les Artwell. His boyish face was dirty and seamed and lined with pain wrinkles;

though through the grime the skin of his nostrils showed white, betraying his effort to suppress the agony that sought expression. His eyes—sullen eyes that she had observed that day beside the railroad track—were glazed with misery and fixed on hers with mute appeal.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" she cried, frantically. "O my God, that 's blood!" she gasped as, placing a hand upon his chest to keep him from falling against her, she touched a moist spot and recoiled, the moonlight revealing crimson stains on her fingers.

"Don't make a fuss," he admonished weakly. "They 'll get me if you do—Brannon an' Murray. I shot myself accidental—this mornin'. I was ridin' this way, lookin' for help an' expectin' to bring up at Whitman's. Must have lost my bearin's. My hoss throwed me, an' sloped." He paused to breathe huskily and heavily; then went on: "Brannon—he 'd swing me. If you could help me get to Lattimer's place—it 's fifteen miles—south—I 'd get help. Lattimer 's my friend." He broke off and rested his chin on his chest, mumbling.

"Lattimer!"

Josephine spoke the name aloud. That was the man of whom Betty had said: "He would n't hesitate to carry a woman away to the mountains."

And Brannon had said that Denver and Artwell

were friends. Did the two remarks identify that trio as outlaws, or had Betty said that, meaning to be picturesque? And had Brannon linked Denver's and Artwell's names together merely to frighten her?

Concern for her personal safety was strong in her at this instant. Lattimer lived south of the Triangle L; Denver had ridden southward the night before; and now Artwell was asking her to take him to Lattimer's ranch, which act would very probably bring her into the presence of at least one man who had meditated a vicious attack upon her. However, she remembered more of the things Betty had said about Lattimer: "He 's a man, Jo—a real man"; or something to that effect. And certainly a real man would not offer to harm her.

Anyway she must run the risk. She could not let Artwell remain in the stable to die, nor could she deliver him to Brannon that the latter might hang him; and it was very evident that Artwell was not strong enough to ride fifteen miles without assistance.

It is one thing to entertain a principle; it is still another thing to carry one into effect at the risk of one's personal safety. Josephine considered the difference as she stood in the stable doorway watching Artwell. Her reluctance to act in this crisis was overpowering; she was frankly afraid.

But when she saw Artwell slowly turn, steady

himself, and begin to walk into the darkness away from the doorway, she followed him; heard his voice as he tottered ahead of her.

"I got a saddle an' bridle on a hoss. Took me most all day. But I couldn't get on him—no way. Too weak. If you 'd help me a little, mebbe I could manage it. An' maybe—if you 're afraid, an' don't want to take no chances on the folks in the house findin' out—you could go a little ways with me, just to sort of get me started right. I reckon I could make it."

The moonlight streaming into the open doorway made a subdued light in the stable, and somehow she managed to help Artwell into the saddle. The horse stood in a wide stall, and by making use of the manger and the low partition of an adjoining stall, the task was accomplished.

But once in the saddle Artwell seemed to collapse completely. He slumped against the high pommel, inert, helpless.

Pity for Artwell goaded her to a quick decision. The stable was large, and Chesterfield was somewhere in it. She found him after a while stolidly standing in a stall in a corner; and though her awkwardness and her lack of familiarity with riding equipment made the work slow and exasperatingly difficult, she finally got saddle and bridle on Chesterfield, mounted him, and urged him beside Artwell's horse.

A little later she led Artwell's horse out and rode southward, casting apprehensive glances over her shoulder at the ranch-house; fully conscious of the risk she was taking in going with Artwell, accepting the risk with a high courage that filled her with a strange exultation.

CHAPTER XVII

WITH the coming of the first faint light of dawn Josephine caught the dim tracery of a group of buildings that stood on a level at the edge of a timber clump. A thin mist that had swathed the basin was slowly rising, with delicate, veil-like wisps drooping here and there, clinging to the earth as though reluctant to join the slowly disintegrating mass above.

Urging Chesterfield forward, though at a pace which was rather slower than a man could walk, Josephine glanced back at Artwell.

The man was unconscious; though whether he had reached that state from a loss of vitality because of his wound or from weariness, Josephine did not dare to determine. It was enough that she had brought him within sight of Lattimer's ranch without his having fallen from the saddle. She knew she would never be able to touch him, and for that reason she had kept Chesterfield at a slow pace that had been distressing to her strained nerves; though there was no doubt that by traveling slowly she had saved herself the horrible alternative of seeing him fall from the saddle. She was convinced that she could never help him mount

again; she could not have touched him. How he had ever clung to the saddle during the fifteen-mile ride she could not understand, though she supposed it was due to instinctive muscular action.

She was dead tired herself. In that ghostly time when night was not yet gone and morning not yet come, she had ridden forward without having the slightest sense of direction; but with the first light she could distinguish a dim trail which Chesterfield must have been following either from instinct or by knowledge. It made little difference now; she was almost there.

As she guided Chesterfield down a gentle slope that merged with the level upon which stood the buildings that were now very close, she realized that Artwell was not unconscious, for he was mumbling words that were unintelligible at first; though finally she made them out:

"Clear grit; she 's hangin' right on—could n't have made it—must have been out of my head—never made a longer ride—why, no woman—"

Then his voice trailed off into incoherence; and she screamed with horror as, reaching the level, she saw him topple sidewise and fall heavily into the tall grass beside his horse.

She screamed again and sat helplessly in the saddle, seeing the dread limpness of Artwell's body, and how his arms were outflung with the entire

abandonment of muscular control. Artwell could go no farther.

She had dismounted, desperately controlling her jangled nerves, grimly determined to go to Artwell despite the terrible dread that oppressed her, when she heard a shout and saw a horseman riding toward her from the group of buildings.

She must have fainted then, for when she again became conscious of what was going on around her she realized that she was sitting in a big roomy chair on a wide veranda, and that within half a dozen paces of her a big man stood silently watching her.

Artwell and the horses had vanished. A breeze was blowing directly into her face, bathing her hot cheeks with refreshing coolness; her hair was in terrible disorder, for some stray, stubborn wisps were waving before her eyes; and she knew she must tuck them in to be presentable, for the big man who was watching her was handsome and she did n't want him to think she was a dowd. So she tucked the wisps in, drew a deep breath of thankfulness for the cooling breeze, and smiled at the big man. But she was very tired, the big chair was very comfortable, and she made no effort to get up. She would get up presently, though, for she must get back to the Triangle L.

"Feeling better?" asked the big man.

"How is he?" she questioned, not answering the question.

"Artwell will get well," he said. "He is n't badly hurt. Weak from loss of blood. He 's inside, sleeping it off." His gaze was keen, bright, interested. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I 'm Josephine Hamilton."

"I see. Betty Lawson's guest. From the East. Went to school with Betty. You see, I have heard of you."

"Evidently," she smiled. "And you are Mr. Lattimer, of course."

"Why, 'of course'?" he said.

She was almost on the point of saying she knew he was Lattimer because he answered Betty Lawson's decription of Lattimer, which was, "He 's terribly, darkly handsome." Instead she blushed and told him about finding Artwell at the stable door, detailing the incident and ending with the statement that Artwell had indicated that the Lattimer ranch would be found southward.

Never had Josephine seen a man like Lattimer. As he stood there watching her, his legs slightly a-sprawl, his arms folded over his chest, his chin lowered so that he could look into her eyes without effort, she was reminded of another illuminating scrap of Betty's description of him: "If he had lived two hundred years ago he would have been a pirate." And "Lattimer's ancestors were very

likely buccaneers or swash-buckling gentlemen of fortune."

But what a pirate he would have been! Still Josephine did not believe he would have been a pirate. "Gentleman," even if it were necessary to add "swash-buckling," described him more accurately, she thought. For despite the fact that about him lurked an atmosphere of bold recklessness, which she could feel but could not definitely analyze, there was gentle consideration in his eyes, and deference, even though they were somewhat contradicted by a hint of guile and cynical amusement.

Physically he looked like an athlete out of training. For under his woolen shirt were muscles that bulged the garment, especially at the shoulders; and the collar, carelessly left open, revealed a strong neck sheathed by smooth bronzed flesh, healthy and firm.

He had accumulated some flesh about the middle; but not enough to detract from the symmetrical proportions of the rest of him; and the girl perceived that even with the surplus flesh he carried he was as lithe and springy as a runner.

His hat was off, crumpled on another chair. His head was well shaped, and his short, close-cut black hair was glossy, virile. Above his forehead, which was white and well-formed, some of the black hair had matted from perspiration which

clustered in glistening beads. Josephine thought that was one reason she had got the impression of recklessness; a serene, methodical, and careful man would have brushed the moisture away when facing a woman.

The rest of the recklessness was in his eyes, in the lines of his mouth and in the bold contour of his chin and the sweep of his jaw. Josephine could understand why Betty had got so much respect into her words: "He is a man!"

Yet Lattimer's masculinity was not aggressive. It was a subtle quality that insinuated itself by the very restraint the man put upon it. It seemed to Josephine that though Lattimer knew he was masculine to the limits of his sex, consciousness of sex was not visible in his eyes.

Observing that Josephine betrayed no inclination to leave her chair, Lattimer drew another in front of her and dropped into it.

"You and Artwell have met before," he said. "I 've heard about that. You sort of spoiled Brannon's plans there, did n't you?" His eyes glowed with deep, humorous appreciation of her actions in antagonizing Brannon.

"I did n't want Brannon to hang an innocent man!" she declared.

"Then Artwell was innocent? You knew that, I suppose?"

"He—he looked innocent. Besides, he was so

young—too young to die for stealing a horse—even if he did steal it."

"H'm. Steel will have his way in the end, though. There 's no stopping Brannon, once he takes hold of a thing. 'Steel' just fits him. Strike you that way?"

"I think he is merely stubborn."

"Well, you 'd think that, of course—him opposing you. But Brannon is reasonable. If you are right he 'll let you have your way; if he 's wrong he 'll admit it."

She had no comment to make on that statement, so she was silent, looking out into the basin where a painted butte frowned upon the waters of a little river, now glittering in the rays of the silvery sun just sticking its rim over the crest of the low hill on the edge of the basin.

And now she was agitated by the disquieting realization that she would have explanations to make when she returned to the Triangle L; for she would be missed, of course, as would Chesterfield and the horse Artwell had ridden. She meditated upon the embarrassing position in which she had placed herself—that of having to explain her activities of the night to Betty, or of having to lie, which she would do, of course, to keep Brannon from riding over to capture Artwell. And she blushed, betraying her agitation by nervously gripping the arms of the chair in which she was sitting.

"Look here," said Lattimer instantly, "You 're upset. You 've had a mighty tough night of it. You sit where you are for a few minutes while I rustle you some grub."

"I—I don't believe I could eat a bite," she said smiling wanly. "Besides, I have n't time. I must go right away—this minute! Betty will be worried about me; she will—" she paused, pressing her lips tightly together to suppress an emotion that was filling her eyes with a suspicious mist. She did n't want Betty to think ill of her; she felt she could not endure the steady gaze of her friend's honest eyes while she attempted to explain the night's adventure.

"Worrying," said Lattimer soberly. "Well, that's right—you would. But if you don't mind telling a white lie, we can manage it. I 'll get you some breakfast and then you can light out for the Whitman cabin. Tell Mrs. Whitman just what has happened. She 's helped Artwell out of more than one bad fix, and she 'll help him again. She likes Artwell—believes in him. And she 'll lie to save his life. It 's mighty simple. All you have to do is to have Mrs. Whitman tell Betty or Brannon or anybody that you were with her all night."

"But the horse Artwell rode?" inquired Josephine. "They 'll miss it, and they 'll think—"

Lattimer's low laugh interrupted her.

"I reckon whatever thinking they do won't

amount to much," he said. "I 've stripped the saddle and bridle off the horse Artwell rode and headed him toward the Triangle L. Maybe he 'll go straight there, or maybe he'll decide to loaf around the range for a while. It won't make any difference. When they find you 've gone away on Chesterfield they 'll decide you carelessly left the stable door open and the other horse got out. That happens frequently, you know. I 've got the saddle and bridle put away. Some day a Triangle L man will find it and will wonder why it was overlooked. Come now, brace up. You 've saved a man's life; you 've shown grit. Don't spoil it."

"If you are sure about Mrs. Whitman —," began Josephine. She was eager now; filled with admiration for Lattimer's resourcefulness.

"Shucks!" he interrupted, smiling with broad assurance.

He went into the house. Josephine could hear him moving about. A little later he appeared in a doorway.

"Breakfast is ready, Miss Hamilton," he said, quietly.

She got up, hesitated, blushed, and stood irresolute. She was hungry now, but the act of breakfasting with a strange man in a house occupied only by themselves and a sick man who could not act as chaperon was startlingly unconventional and

at variance with her preconceived ideas of womanly deportment.

Lattimer observed her hesitation.

"Breakfast is served for one, of course, Miss Hamilton," he said, with a faint hint of mockery in his voice. "I had mine some time ago. Also, I expect to enjoy the air while you are inside."

He stepped out upon the veranda, bowed to her as she passed him with an embarrassed smile and a blush, and then seated himself on the veranda edge and smoked a huge pipe while waiting for her to finish.

When at last she came out Lattimer knocked the ashes from his pipe, got up, and smiled at her.

"Feeling better?"

"Decidedly better."

In the glance they exchanged as they stood close together, each betrayed knowledge of the other's thoughts. It was plain to Josephine that Lattimer had enjoyed her embarrassment; a light in his eyes which said plainly: "Well, you had no reason to fear me, after all, did you?" convinced her.

"You had no breakfast," she said.

"How do you know?"

"There would have been signs—dishes, pans. Besides, I heard you building a fire in the stove. It was selfish of me," she admitted, reddening again. "But you see—"

"I see many things, Miss Hamilton. For one

thing, word of the evil reputation I bear has reached your ears. Betty Lawson has been talking about me. She said: 'Satan Lattimer is not to be trusted.' Was n't it that?"

"No." Josephine's gaze was steady. "Do you think I should have come here if I had heard that about you? Not even to save Artwell from hanging! Betty told me you were a real man. You have proved it this morning; and I thank you."

She saw his eyes light with a strange fire. He drew a deep breath. Then the light died out of his eyes; they glinted with a mocking incredulity, which passed swiftly to be replaced by steady, serene amusement. He laughed, lowly, vibrantly.

"Betty 's a wonder." He was serious again; his gaze was level, direct.

"I expect Betty is n't feeling any too joyful right now," he said.

"What do you mean?" Josephine's color changed; her eyes were troubled. "Oh," she said, "I suppose you refer to her discovering my absence."

"Referring to Brannon killing Callahan. It is n't generally known, but Betty thinks a great deal of Brannon; and Brannon has n't eyes to see it."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, astonished. "How did you hear about Callahan?"

"Cole Meeder rode over here yesterday afternoon. Meeder is n't satisfied with Brannon's story

—nor with yours, for that matter. You see, the two stories did n't gibe. You told Meeder Callahan attacked you on the gallery; Brannon said he saw Callahan prowling around on the porch, and shot him, thinking he was Denver. Remembering the bad blood between Callahan and Brannon, Meeder is suspicious that either you or Brannon is lying."

Josephine could not endure Lattimer's steady gaze. Her own dropped; she felt a wave of telltale color slowly surging into her cheeks. When at last she defiantly raised her eyes to Lattimer's, there was an amused, comprehending smile on his lips.

She gasped; Lattimer laughed softly.

"You did the fibbing, Miss Hamilton," he said. "No, I am not a mind-reader, though you gave yourself away just now. But I did n't use that evidence. You see, I knew Callahan. Callahan wouldn't do what you accused him of. Of course, you had to make it strong to Meeder if you wanted to save Brannon. What I can't understand is why you wanted to save Brannon at the cost of Callahan's reputation. If Brannon did the killing he ought to be man enough to take the blame without depending upon such a story as you told."

"He did take the blame!" she declared. "You said so only a minute ago!"

"Well," he said, his eyes glowing with admira-

tion, "you 've got the spirit to stick up for your friends."

"Brannon is n't my friend!" she declared. "I —I merely said that—"

She paused, frightened, realizing that she had been on the point of betraying herself; aware that she had already said enough to make Lattimer's suspicion a certainty. She was convinced of it when she caught Lattimer's glance.

"Miss Hamilton," he said gravely, "Your secret is safe with me. As a matter of fact we both have secrets. For if it were known that I am shielding Les Artwell, if Brannon and the Triangle L boys knew about me appropriating the saddle and bridle I took from that Triangle L horse a little while ago, this country would be very unsafe for me. It seems we 've both got to be careful what we say." He laughed. "If we are not careful, our principle of helping the under dog will get us both into trouble."

She was watching him with startled eyes.

"Do you mean to say that if it were discovered that you had taken Artwell in after—after I brought him here; that you—that Brannon would be justified in accusing you of complicity?"

"If I kept Artwell here—as I mean to do until he gets well enough to travel. Yes, Brannon could accuse me of that, and under present condi-

tions he'd very likely be supported by the entire country."

"W—what conditions?"

"You haven't heard, eh? Well, there is no proof, as yet; but there is a rather well-founded suspicion in the minds of nearly all of the cattlemen in the vicinity that a well-organized band of horse-thieves is working in the section. A good many men are under suspicion—perhaps myself. Les Artwell is another, though I believe he is as innocent as I am."

"Why, then—if Artwell *is* guilty—I have helped him!"

She stood, appalled. The possibility of Artwell's guilt had not occurred to her. He was so young, and his sullen eyes had seemed so completely to express a conviction that he was being persecuted, that she had not thought it possible he could be guilty.

"Artwell isn't guilty," came Lattimer's voice reassuringly. "Don't be frightened; and don't let anybody wheedle you into talking as you talked to me a few minutes ago—about Brannon."

She felt one of his hands on her shoulder, gently urging her off the porch to the ground beside it. She looked up at Lattimer, wondering at the easy familiarity of his touch; surprised that there was no resentment in her heart over the action. Was

it that the culpability of both under the "conditions" he had mentioned had created a bond between them; or was she under the spell of that insinuatingly subtle dominance which she had felt with her first glance at him—the dominance of the conqueror of women, supremely confident of his powers?

She did not know. She was aware that she liked him; that his touch thrilled her—more deeply than had Brannon's when he had placed a hand on her hair in the big room of the Triangle L ranchhouse. And as she rode toward the Whitman cabin, after Lattimer had got her horse and pointed out the trail to her, she mentally acknowledged, though she blushed at the admission, that she rather enjoyed being dominated by the man.

Lattimer watched her from the porch, until she diminished to a mere dot in his vision. Then, his eyes chilling, he entered the house, walking heavily through the kitchen and entering another room in which, on a bed, lay Les Artwell. Seated on the edge of the bed was Denver.

Denver had been attending Artwell's wound, as Artwell's shirt, open at the chest where there was a ragged hole through a big muscle, testified; and Artwell was again conscious, though his eyes were rather bright and his color high.

Denver looked up as Lattimer entered; but Lat-

timer paid no attention to him. He strode to the bed and stood over Artwell. The chill was still in Lattimer's eyes.

"Artwell he said coldly, "why did you kill Tim Callahan?"

The wounded man's color heightened; his gaze shifted; a deadly fear glinted his eyes.

"The damn fool stumbled right onto me," he finally blurted. "I was headed for here, and tryin' to get back without anybody seein' me. Callahan come a-tearin' out of some timber about a mile an' a half from the Triangle L. My hoss had throwed me an' was cuttin' it. I was aimin' to ketch him when Callahan busted out of the timber an' throwed down on me—him recognizin' me by the moonlight, I reckon, which was plenty bright.

"I tumbled down into a shallow gully, an' I reckon I was laid out for a time; for when I come to an' crawled back to the top of the gully I saw Callahan leadin' his hoss back toward the Triangle L—the hoss bein' lamed bad. I'd lost my temper a little an' I followed Callahan, gettin' within range just as he got to the door of the ranch-house. I figgered he'd gone back there for a fresh hoss.

"I let him have it. Then, feelin' pretty weak, an' knowin' some one was in the house an' in the foreman's shack, I slipped around back an' got into the stable, figgerin' to saddle a hoss an' light out.

I must have keeled over, for the next thing I knowed—"

"I know the rest of it," said Lattimer. "You took a big chance, Les, by letting your temper get the best of you. Do you know Brannon was in his shack when you got Callahan?"

The chill left his eyes; they narrowed, gleamed with sardonic amusement.

"Luck!" he exclaimed, laughing deeply. "You did a good job after all, Les. By sending Callahan out you settled a personal grudge and got rid of a man who was beginning to get mighty suspicious of us. And you've got Meeder and all the rest of them thinking Brannon put Callahan out of the way, which, because of the bad blood between the Star and the Triangle, will keep both outfits pretty busy watching each other.

"But Brannon 's got me guessing. Artwell, you did for Callahan. What do you suppose made Brannon ride over to the Star and tell Cole Meeder he killed Callahan? We 've got to watch ourselves on that point; Brannon's got something up his sleeve!"

Denver laughed harshly. "It 's a petticoat!" he said venomously.

"Betty Lawson?" Lattimer had wheeled to face Denver; he was watching Denver with a coldly speculative gaze.

"Haw! haw!" laughed Denver. "Brannon ain't

got sense enough to see that Betty 's dead in love with him. It 's that female which has just pulled her freight away from here that Brannon 's got his eye on!"

"How do you know, Denver?" Lattimer's voice was low, even; but there was passion behind it.

"How do I know? Hell!" Denver got up from the bed and leered into Lattimer's face. With brazen disregard for the moral aspect of the tale, and seemingly with no shame for his own dastardly part in the affair, he related the story of his attack on Josephine, together with his clashes with Brannon. He told how he had stood outside the house while Brannon had patted Josephine's hair, and how he had watched Brannon surrender his gun to the girl.

"I reckon when a guy will do them things a girl has got him goin' pretty strong," he laughed in conclusion.

Lattimer had not changed position during the telling of Denver's story, nor had his face changed expression. But when Denver finished Lattimer walked close to him and looked into his eyes.

Denver must have correctly read the expression, for his pallor became ghastly, and he muttered thickly, rapidly, "I only meant to kiss her, boss, so help me Gawd!"

"Even that was too much," said Lattimer. His voice was dry and light but well-controlled, though

with a sinister threat lurking in it that blanched even Artwell's face. Denver seemed paralyzed by the menace of Lattimer's manner, and he stood motionless, loose-lipped, fearful.

"Too much, Denver," repeated Lattimer in the same voice. "Don't touch her; don't even look at her again where I can see you. She belongs to me!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AT daybreak a thin column of smoke spiraled upward from the Triangle L foreman's shanty, flattening out when it met a thin mist like that which had attracted Josephine's attention fifteen miles southward.

Shortly after the smoke appeared Brannon emerged from the cabin, went to the windmill for water and returned. Half an hour later he was in the corral roping his horse—the big black.

He had got saddle and bridle on the animal, had trailed the reins over its head, and was closing the corral gate, when he glanced toward the stable. Unhurried, he locked the corral gate, patted the black horse affectionately on a hip, and walked toward the stable.

Passing the bunk-house Lin Murray called to him sonorously:

"I 'll be with you soon 's I can rustle up some grub!"

"Take your time, Lin," returned Brannon.

He was walking on when Murray's voice reached him again:

"Chong came in about midnight. His hoss is in the corral. Says Mrs. Whitman 's a lot better."

Brannon's eyes quickened. While at the corral gates his glance stableward had shown him a horse, saddled and bridled, standing in the lee of a lean-to at the side of the structure—a building used for the storing of miscellaneous articles. His first thought was that Chong had left his horse saddled and bridled during the night, thus being guilty of reprehensible negligence. For he, too, had heard Chong ride in, had heard him muttering softly in his unintelligible jargon.

But Murray's statement that Chong had turned his horse into the corral indicated that the horse standing near the lean-to was not the one Chong had ridden; and Brannon's interest was now keenly suspicious rather than critical.

Standing close to the strange horse, Brannon gravely inspected him, his eyes gleaming when he saw on the beast's hip a well-defined "L," lying on its side. It was Lattimer's brand, the Lazy L.

Brannon spoke gently to the horse and walked slowly around it. The saddle was covered with a thick layer of dust; the high pommel was battered and looked as though it had been driven deeply into the ground, for there were hardened particles of earth clinging to it. The cantle, too, was battered, as though some heavy weight had struck it. The bridle-rein was broken and the latigo-strings had been torn from their holes.

"He 's been rolling," was Brannon's mental ob-

servation. "Roaming the country without a rider, for—well, maybe last night—or longer," he concluded after examining the dust on the saddle and the battered horn and cantle.

Brannon unstrapped the slicker, laid it on the ground, and unrolled it, Various articles were disclosed—a tin cup, a bit of mirror, a shaving-brush, soap, a small coffee-pot, a can of tomatoes—an admirable thirst quencher—a canvas-covered canteen full of water, several other articles, and some food and matches.

Brannon's interest centered upon the shaving-brush. It was a cheap affair with a wooden handle upon which had been cut, apparently with a knife, the initials "L. A."

Brannon could find no marks on any of the other articles. But, apparently satisfied, he restored them all to the slicker, rerolled the latter, and strapped it to the cantle of the saddle.

Then, his eyes gleaming, he peered intently at the ranch-house, to see that the window-shades were still drawn and that no smoke came from the kitchen chimney. Chong was usually astir at this hour. but evidently his night ride had wearied him. Betty, he knew, would not arise until about sunrise.

Leading the strange horse behind the stable where he could not be seen from the house, Brannon relaced the cinch-straps and tied the broken

reins together. Then he swung into the saddle and rode slowly toward the river, still keeping the stable between himself and the house. The river was fringed with timber for a point near the corral fence. Then came a break, where he was forced to risk being seen from the house; but after that timber and brush made a screen behind which he rode in security.

He rode the horse half a mile down the river, dismounted and tied him to a tree with a hackamore that was fastened to the pommel of the saddle, left the animal there, and walked back to the stable.

The ranch-house was still swathed in silence; even Murray had not made his appearance; and Brannon had apparently not been seen.

He had observed that the stable door was open. He entered, glanced swiftly into the stalls and at the pegs from which half a dozen saddles dangled; his examination resulting in the conviction that two horses and saddles were missing.

"Billy and Chesterfield," he remarked aloud. His eyes took on an expression of cynical amusement, tempered with a hint of the grim coldness that had brought upon him the cognomen "Steel."

"She 's sure fanning it some!" was his mental comment upon the evidence that Josephine was again interfering with matters that should not concern her. He was convinced that no one but Josephine would ride Chesterfield. Certainly Betty

would not ride the staid old animal; and if Les Artwell's companion were a man he would have chosen any of the several remaining horses in the stable in preference to Chesterfield.

But Brannon wanted to be sure; and before he left the ranch-house to go southward with Murray he meant to invent some excuse that would enable him to arouse the occupants of the ranch-house—either Chong or Betty—to discover if Josephine had gone out.

He walked to the door of the stable and glanced at the house. His gaze went downward when he observed that there were no visible signs of movement inside. Instantly he went to his knees and intently examined a crimson stain on some matted straw in the doorway. He got up presently, the movement bringing his face close to one of the door-jambs, upon which were other crimson stains. made, undeniably, by fingers—a woman's fingers!

Brannon reëntered the stable. When he again came to the door he was convinced; for in the straw of a box stall was the impression of a man's body, and other red stains, showing that he who had been wounded had been in the stable for many hours.

Brannon closed the stable door and went to the mess-house, where he found Murray just finishing breakfast.

"Took me longer 'n I thought it would," growled

Murray when he saw the other. "Ain't it like that, though, all the time? If you 're in a hurry,—not wantin' to disappoint some one, every damned thing seems to go wrong. There 's that mis'able stove. I built one fire in that mis'able stove, an' it went out. It 's worse 'n a—"

"Brannon," came Betty's voice from the mess-house door, "will you please come here for a minute?"

Brannon turned swiftly. Betty's face was pale; her lips were white. The forced calmness of her voice was oddly contradicted by the restrained excitement that glowed in her eyes.

She did not speak until Brannon had followed her half-way to the ranch-house; and before she spoke Brannon knew what she was going to say.

"Brannon," she said, "something has happened to Josephine! Her bed has not been slept in, and Chesterfield is gone! What do you suppose has happened? If any harm has come to her, I—I shall never forgive myself!

"I reckon there is n't much that could happen," consoled Brannon. "She 's gone riding, probably. Yesterday she was worried about Mrs. Whitman. It 's likely she 's ridden over there. I 'll send Murray to the outfit and I 'll slip over to Whitman's."

"I'll go with you, Brannon! You don't think—Denver came back—could have intercepted her—

if she did go to Whitman's? Brannon!" she cried in exasperation when he merely shook his head negatively at her mention of Denver; "have you no nerves? You don't seem to realize that Jo is my guest, Brannon, and that I am responsible for her!"

"Sure," he agreed, quickly. "But there 's no need of two of us going to Whitman's." He was certain Betty would not find Josephine at Whitman's; and he was thinking of the Lazy L horse htiched to a tree in the river bottom,

He caught Betty's horse, and while she was inside the ranch-house changing her clothes he saddled and bridled the animal.

"Don't get to worrying," he advised her with a smile as he helped her into the saddle; "you 'll find nothing has happened. I reckon you won't be in so much of a hurry that you 'll ride plumb into that quicksand at the north ford?"

He watched her horse skitter down the side of a little gully, up the other side, and across an alkali flat.

Later, he was standing at the corral gate with Murray, who had mounted and was waiting for him.

"Lin," he said, "I 've changed my mind about going to the south range. Look for me to-morrow."

"Sure," said Murray. He did not voice his mild surprise over the change in Brannon's plans.

"Well, so-long," he said. He rode half a dozen paces, pulled his horse up, and said banteringly over his shoulder:

"I would n't be playin' no lone hand right now, Steel."

"A clean miss," smiled Brannon. "It is n't the Star outfit."

Murray's expression indicated plainly that he was curious; but he shut his lips disappointedly and loped his horse southward.

Not until Murray was a mere dot on the horizon did Brannon move. Then he mounted and rode down the river trail to where he had left the Lazy L horse. A few minutes later he also rode away leading the other beast, following a dim trail that led slightly southwestward. The trail Murray had taken went directly south.

After riding several miles Brannon glimpsed a moving dot on a low ridge at his right. He abruptly left the trail he had been riding and dropped into a dry arroyo, which he followed half a mile to a sweep of grassy land which melted into the ridge upon whose crest he had noted the moving dot.

When he reached the crest of the ridge he saw a horse grazing in a little grass-carpeted valley below

him. The animal was a sorrel; with an irregular patch of white on its right side, back of the shoulder and below the withers; and at sight of him Brannon's lips straightened.

"Billy," he said softly.

A doubt that had been disturbing Brannon had been dispelled. If Billy had merely strayed from the stable in search of grass he would not have come in this direction when there was an abundance eastward, nearer the ranch-house, where there was also water.

Brannon trailed the reins over the head of the Lazy L animal and urged the black down into the valley, approaching Billy slowly. He wanted a closer look at Billy.

He roped the animal and threw him. And when Billy got over his resentment Brannon walked close to him, while the black still kept the rope taut, and inspected him.

Billy had been confined to the stable for several days to undergo treatment for some digestive disorder. Carson, the horse-wrangler, had taken exceptional care of him, currying him daily. Several times Brannon had looked in at the animal to note his progress.

The patch of white behind Billy's shoulder was stained darkly. Upon his back were prints of a saddle, upon his ribs was the impression of a saddle-skirt, and around his belly were deep, smooth,

sweat-matted lines where the broad cinch-straps had been pressing against him. The stains on the white patch were blood-stains, and they showed only in a narrow streak near Billy's shoulder at a point left exposed by the saddle-blanket.

Brannon took his rope off the animal and sent him scurrying over the back trail, riding after him for a considerable distance, until Billy was far ahead and traveling steadily.

Then Brannon returned to the Lazy L horse and again rode the south trail.

The story of the killing of Callahan was as plain to Brannon now as though it were printed on the pages of a book. After removing Callahan's body to his shack he had examined the gun in the man's holster, to find one chamber empty. Because he had concluded that Josephine had shot Callahan he had been puzzled by the empty chamber in the man's weapon, though he finally decided that Callahan had previously done some shooting and had carelessly neglected to reload the weapon.

It was now evident that Les Artwell had received the bullet from Callahan's weapon; though of course the shooting must have been done at a distance from the ranch-house or the sound would have been heard. Therefore Artwell must have trailed Callahan after being shot, killing the Star owner when the latter had turned his back while on the veranda.

The fact that Artwell had concealed himself in the stable accounted for the fact that Brannon, after running to the veranda immediately after the shooting had heard no scurrying hoof-beats which would indicate that the assassin had fled.

Josephine had found Artwell in the stable and had helped him to escape. Artwell was badly wounded, and Josephine had taken him to Lattimer's place.

The only obscure point was that which hinged upon the finding by Brannon of the horse, saddled and bridled, bearing Lattimer's brand; though even that point was not so puzzling when one took into account the condition of the saddle, the broken-reins, and the discovery of the initials on the shaving-brush that Brannon had found in the slicker. Artwell had ridden the horse, of course; but whether he had stolen it from Lattimer, or whether Lattimer had sold or lent it to him was a question. The fact that Josephine had taken Artwell to Lattimer's ranch seemed to indicate friendliness between the two men; and any sort of a friendship between even an honest cattle-man and a known horse-thief was a suspicious circumstance which required rigid investigation.

However, Brannon did not intend to voice his suspicions. Nor did he intend to make any immediate effort to capture Les Artwell. It had been through his instrumentality that Artwell had been

apprehended the other time: and he was rather glad now that Josephine Hamilton had interfered; was glad that she had again meddled with the matter; for by doing so she had brought suspicion upon Lattimer, had developed a new lead which might result in the apprehension of the entire band of thieves, instead of only Les Artwell.

Beneath Brannon's satisfaction was a deeper emotion—a vast relief over the discovery that Josephine had not shot Callahan. Her championship of Artwell, her activities of last night, and her mistake in riding with the horse-thief to Lattimer's ranch could be explained by her devotion to the principles she had already expounded and defended, and by her determined, if somewhat arbitrary, attempts to regulate human conduct in her new environment.

But the emotion that struck deep into Brannon's consciousness, that filled him with a solemn exhilaration which he attempted to fight with cynical amusement—and could not—was caused by the realization that Josephine had lied to save him!

The sun was swimming high when Brannon rode up to the veranda of the Lazy L ranch-house and brought the black horse to a halt. He did not dismount, and the reins of the led horse were looped in his left arm.

Inside the house Lattimer, Denver, and Artwell heard Brannon's call. They had been watching him for fifteen minutes; and when the black horse

halted at the edge of the veranda Lattimer coldly ordered Denver to drop the rifle he had picked up.

"None of that, you damn fool! You 'd have the whole country on top of us!"

In the interval between Brannon's first call and the next, he permitted his gaze to rove around. Leisurely he scrutinized the corrals, the level around the house, various tracks of iron shoes on the hard ground; observing particularly a square of white linen that lay crumpled on the ground at the edge of the veranda—a woman's handkerchief.

But he gave no sign of astonishment or interest at what he saw. The keen, suspicious eyes that watched him from inside the ranch-house were unable to communicate to the brains of their owners any odd gleam of Brannon's eyes that would provide proof that Brannon saw anything unusual.

And yet, besides the handkerchief, Brannon's leisurely gaze had discovered other proof that Lattimer had visitors. Denver's horse was in the corral.

Thus Brannon felt he was being watched. However, he betrayed no indication of embarrassment or suspicion. With the reins of the led horse still in the crook of his left elbow he rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and sat there calmly smoking.

"That 's the horse I let you take, Artwell," said Lattimer. "Damn him!" he laughed with a grim

admiration for Brannon's unconcerned demeanor; "he 's got nerve!"

"You guys lie low; I 've got to show, or he 'll get suspicious," he added.

He slipped out of the back door, ran for an outbuilding, skirted it, ran low behind a wind-break near the stable, and came into view at the other side of the structure. He answered Brannon's third call with a shout:

"What 's up!"

Brannon waved a hand in greeting, and pulled the black around so that he faced Lattimer when the latter approached, smiling a counterfeit welcome.

Brannon's smile, equally insincere, had more depth and guile than the other's; for he had caught a glimpse of Lattimer as he passed from the wind-break to the stable.

"I 've brought you a horse, Lattimer," he said.

"Hell—it 's Streak!" said Lattimer. "We missed him—and a saddle!" He met Brannon's level gaze steadily. "Brannon," he said angrily, "those thieves are getting damned bold when they 'll take a horse right out of a man's stable!"

"That 's so, Lattimer. When did you miss your horse?"

"Yesterday morning. Stable door was wide open Where did you pick him up, Brannon?"

"About ten miles back. Murray and me were

heading for the south range. I sent Murray on."

Lattimer had caught sight of the handkerchief on the ground at the edge of the porch. It was close to him and he placed a foot on it. He cast a swift glance at Brannon, but apparently Brannon had not seen the movement for he was puffing unconcernedly at his cigarette.

"Much obliged to you, Brannon," said Lattimer.

"Don't take on any airs, Lattimer," said Brannon, smiling blandly as he met the other's gaze. "These thieves are not playing favorites. This morning a Triangle L horse turned up missing. Also a saddle—and a bridle. But I reckon whoever stole him wanted a bridle worse than a horse. For about six miles out I ran into the horse, heading home. There were saddle-marks on him, but no saddle or bridle. Whoever took him must have had another horse holed up somewhere—or is hoofing it. You have n't seen a rider with two saddles passing this way?"

"Not even with one saddle," laughed Lattimer. "Nobody 's been past here—at least if they did they passed before I rolled out."

"Well, I reckon I 'll be getting on," said Brannon. "South range to-morrow. Might as well make it a day, now. I 'm stopping to look at Ben Whitman's mother. Wanting to send any word?"

"Tell her I 'm glad she 's better. Heard she was

He met Brannon's level gaze steadily

sick the other night—the night Tim Callahan got it." He looked straight at Brannon.

"Never thought it of Tim," said Brannon. There 's two stories; mine and Miss Hamilton's. She says Callahan attacked her. Maybe he did; I did n't see it. She 'd fought him off and closed the door, most likely. For when I got there the door was closed and Callahan was on the gallery. I downed him, thinking he was Denver, who 'd been deviling the girl."

Since he had seen the handkerchief on the ground and had observed Lattimer's eagerness to conceal it, he was positive that Josephine had brought Artwell here; was convinced that both Artwell and Denver were in the house and that one or both of them had been watching him.

Brannon told the lie with a steadiness quite as convincing as that with which he had confronted the Star outfit. Knowing Brannon was lying, something was added to Lattimer's grim respect for the man's iron-like imperturbability.

Brannon was aware that Lattimer knew he was lying, for by this time Les Artwell must have given the other some inkling of what had happened. Also the fact that Denver's horse was in the corral, the presence of the handkerchief on the ground under Lattimer's foot, together with Lattimer's obvious determination to keep secret Josephine Hamil-

ton's visit, indicated knowledge that was almost complete, with the possible exception of a few unimportant details.

While there had never been any sort of a friendship between Brannon and Lattimer nor any pretense of cordiality, there had been in the hearts of both of them a sober respect for the manly qualities each had exhibited. This respect on Brannon's part was founded upon his unerring estimate of Lattimer's rugged, aggressive manhood, instinctively determined by his steady, probing gaze into the other's eyes. He never had liked Lattimer and he knew something of the man's way with women, yet he knew Lattimer could be a steadfast, loyal friend or a royal enemy.

Lattimer had formed his estimate of Brannon in much the same manner. Confronting Brannon at this minute, Lattimer knew that his verbal fencing meant merely that though Brannon was suspicious—perhaps entirely convinced—he meant to defer action until he obtained complete, damning evidence.

Malicious amusement was Lattimer's present emotion.

"Cole Meeder was telling me both stories," he said. "I was believing the one Meeder said Miss Hamilton told. Tim being shot in the back sort of indicated you had to shoot mighty quick—which you 'd do if he was doing what Miss Hamilton said he was doing."

Brannon's face betrayed no emotion at the other's subtle slur.

"If I remember, I was telling you I thought Callahan was Denver," he said. "I was n't figuring to waste any time on that polecat."

Casually, it seemed, with no hint of an ulterior purpose in his eye, he glanced toward the corral; his gaze seeming to center upon Denver's horse.

Lattimer's gaze involuntarily followed Brannon's. A dark flush stained Lattimer's neck and cheeks; but when he shot a furtive glance at Brannon the other seemed not to have noticed; did not even look toward him. Yet now Lattimer had recovered his self-possession.

"Denver, eh?" he said, smoothly. "If you 'd look right close you 'd see Denver's horse in my corral. That roan, with the black fetlocks. Denver drifted this way early yesterday morning. Said he was heading west, thinking of Laskar. I traded him a black outlaw horse for the roan. I was sort of suprised at him leaving the Triangle L, but did n't ask any question. It 's mighty plain now. So you had trouble with him?"

"Shucks!" Brannon's smile was coldly contemptuous. "A man don't have trouble with a *hombre* like Denver; he just takes his gun away and turns him loose. Denver's brain is n't very active, Lattimer; he 's got to be told a thing straight, so he won't misunderstand. If he was broad-gage,

like you, Lattimer, I would n't have had to be so sudden with him."

He turned now and looked at Lattimer. For an instant Lattimer's eyes chilled as when he had looked at Les Artwell and Denver inside the house. They then took on a coldly appreciative glint, oddly mingled with a bold, reckless humor.

Brannon dropped the reins of the Lazy L horse, wheeled his own animal, and rode away northward, omitting the customary parting word, "So-long," leaving Lattimer to stare after him with a full consciousness of the sinister, subtle threat that had been concealed by his reference to "broad-gage" men.

CHAPTER XIX

ALTHOUGH Betty had tried her best to maintain her usual friendly concern for Josephine the night before, after she had talked with Brannon near Brannon's cabin, Josephine had detected the constraint in Betty's manner. It had been the first time since Josephine had been a guest at the Triangle L that Betty had not accompanied her to her room, to sit on the bed for a few minutes exchanging feminine confidences.

However, Josephine had seen nothing significant in Betty's omission of the nightly communion, until, riding toward the Whitman cabin this morning, she began to seek justification for her action in taking Artwell to Lattimer's place. Her mind, involuntarily groping for some excuse, seized upon the memory of Betty's perplexed expression during the interval between supper and Betty's rather stiffly formal good-night, and magnified it into distrust.

Resentment quickly followed; and Josephine's cheeks burned. Why, Betty's manner of last night, her neglect, her constraint, and her perplexity constituted an affront. It was very plain to Josephine that Betty had not believed her story of the killing of Callahan!

Josephine's indignation was righteous until she remembered that she *had lied* about claiming to have seen Brannon shoot the Star owner, and in asserting that Callahan had attacked her. Then Josephine's cheeks again grew hot.

She remembered, though, that when she had told Betty that she and Brannon had been alone at the ranch-house during the night, Betty had looked sharply at her, and that later Betty had talked with Brannon while Brannon was unloading the buckboard; that still later, Betty had gone to Brannon's cabin. Josephine had watched her, and she now remembered that Betty's coolness toward her began when she returned from Brannon's cabin.

Was it possible Betty thought there was something reprehensible in the fact that she had been alone with Brannon during the night? Did Betty suspect she had not told the truth about the killing of Callahan; and had Brannon told the truth, thus convicting her of a rather grotesque falsehood?

She believed Brannon had done just that; and therefore her attempt to justify his shooting of the Star owner had made her appear ridiculous in Betty's eyes.

Josephine's formidable chin grew more formidable as she drew near the Whitman cabin. An accession of stubbornness, following certain rebel-

lious impulses, brought a flash into her eyes and made her lips set rigidly.

If Betty could think these things of her, if she chose to accept Brannon's word against hers, it seemed there was nothing to do but to pack her belongings and return East. She could not endure Betty's suspicion; she could not remain at the Triangle L and have her every action subjected to analysis, with the expectation that something clandestine would be discovered. That sort of thing would be intolerable!

And yet she discovered that she was reluctant to leave. Subtle forces, which she was not as yet prepared to describe—which she could not have described if she had tried—were resisting her impetuous decision.

The solemn grandeur of the country was beginning to cast its spell upon her. Insidious, subtle, gradual, had come her realization of the beauty of the virgin country, though perhaps she would not have detected her enthralment had she not been confronted with the possibility of leaving.

Yet, though she admired the country, her thoughts were dwelling upon Lattimer; and she kept seeing the man as he had stood before her with one hand resting familiarly on her shoulder.

Against her will she had been impressed by Brannon, realizing the intense vitality of him and subconsciously sensing the appeal he had made to

all that was feminine in her. But the impression Brannon had made upon her was not to be compared with the lure of Lattimer.

Lattimer was bigger than Brannon. Brannon was cold, unemotional, and of steel-like smoothness. Lattimer was rugged, intensely human, volatile, eager—a slumbering firebrand of passion. He was a danger to be dreaded, a mystery to be solved; and the very hazard of coming into contact with him, in arousing him to a sense of her desirability, was insinuatingly delightful.

So, without definitely understanding why, she decided she could not leave, despite her resentment of Betty's conduct towards her.

On her previous visit to the Whitman cabin she had not encountered Ben Whitman; and when she rode up to the gate of the little corral within a few hundred yards of the cabin, she stared in amazement at the lithe, clear-eyed young giant who greeted her with:

"Good mawnin', ma'am."

Betty had spoken of Mrs. Whitman's son, Ben; and because Mrs. Whitman was small and slight and delicate, Josephine had supposed her son to be like her.

"Are you Mrs. Whitman's son?" she asked.

"You 've hit it first pop, ma'am," he drawled.

His voice was certainly not small or delicate. It was deep, vibrant, and delightfully Southern, as

was his courtly, deferential bow as he smiled at her.

"I reckon you 're Miss Hamilton, ma'am," he said—she thought to cover her obvious embarrassment. "You must be Miss Hamilton, of course," he went on; "because you 're the only stranger around hyeh just now. You 've come to see mother, I reckon?"

He helped her from Chesterfield and preceded her to the house; she walking behind him, observing how supremely unconscious he seemed of her presence.

At the door he halted, opened it for her.

"You 'll find mother in the sitting-room," he said gently. "She 'll be mighty glad to see you, for she 's beeen talking about you ever since you were hyeh before." He flashed a smile at her as she entered.

Josephine had some difficulty in stating the object of her errand. But once she began, the invalid's obvious sympathy made the task an easy one.

Mrs. Whitman was sitting in a big chair, which was padded with soft cushions and blankets; and her birdlike eyes, gleaming with kindness and interest, never wavered from Josephine's while the latter talked.

"It 's too bad about Les," she said when Josephine finished. "Certainly I 'll tell Betty you were hyeh all night. There 'll be no harm done. Les is an odd boy," she went on. "He don't seem to

have any will-power whatever. He 's always in trouble. I reckon some folks are born that way, though; which is no reason why the rest of us normal folks should be hard on them." She smiled at Josephine. "Just go to the door and call Ben, won't you, my dear?"

The young giant came in silently in response to Josephine's call; and at his mother's injunction to be careful to tell any inquirers that Josephine had stayed all night at the cabin he gravely said:

"I reckon I 'll be gettin' the trappin's off her hawss, then."

Evidently he did not intend to ask any questions, for he turned to go.

Mrs. Whitman's voice halted him.

"Les is in trouble again."

"What 's he been doin' now?"

"Miss Hamilton found him in the Triangle stable badly wounded. It was late last night. She took him over to Lattimer's!"

"Lattimer's?" The giant's eyes glowed with a deep fire. Under his intense gaze Josephine felt uncomfortable; it was as though he was trying to read her thoughts and was expecting to find them shameful. When she looked straight at him, the fire went out of his eyes; his gaze became quizzical, kindly.

"Why did you take him to Lattimer's, ma'am?"

"He asked to go there. Why do you ask? Is there any reason why he should n't have gone there?"

She caught the swift glance that passed between Ben and his mother, but she could attach no significance to it because Ben's eyes had no expression, and Mrs. Whitman's gaze was steady with seeming indifference.

With Ben giving his silent attention, Mrs. Whitman related the story told by Josephine.

"I reckon you 're right," said Ben; "Brannon would swing him quicker than a wink if he knew he was at Lattimer's. Brannon ain't to be monkeyed with!" His gaze was level. "You say you saw Brannon shoot Callahan?"

"Yes." The blood mounted to her face. She did n't want to lie in Mrs. Whitman's presence; but she must not let them know that Brannon had deliberately murdered Callahan, for since Lattimer had told her there had been "bad blood" between Brannon and Callahan a motive for the killing had been established in her mind, and she was fearful that if she did n't stick to her story the Star man would exact vengeance from Brannon. And then there was Lattimer's warning, to the effect that she must not let anybody "wheedle" the truth out of her.

"Callahan attacked you?" asked Ben.

"I told you he did, Ben," mildly replied Mrs. Whitman, speaking for Josephine.

Ben scratched his head. His eyes were perplexed, troubled. "I can't get that through my haid, seems like," he said, looking at Josephine; "though of course if you say so it must be true." He turned to the door. "I 'll be puttin' your hawss away," he finished, as he went out.

"Brannon's hard," said Josephine, ending a silence that followed Ben's exit.

"He can't be driven, my dear, if that is what you mean," said Mrs. Whitman gently. "Several men have tried it. Men like Brannon are a wonderful help in a lawless country like this. Even the outlaws are careful not to antagonize him. They all know him as a man who cannot be intimidated. They know that when he gives his word he will keep it, and that he never gives an inch after he makes up his mind. But there 's a sweet, gentle side to him; and he is just and very honorable."

Mrs. Whitman's bright, kindly eyes seemed to search the inner recesses of Josephine's mind; she felt as though a powerful light was being turned upon it. Whereat she blushed.

"You don't like Brannon, my dear?"

"No," said Josephine, shortly. "That is, I—I believe I respect him, of course. But he is arrogant, domineering."

Mrs. Whitman's smile was inscrutable. She did

not answer. She seemed to be listening for outside sounds while watching Josephine.

"Some one is coming," she said, presently. "It will be somebody from the Triangle L, my dear, searching for you.

It was Betty. She came in, her face rather pale, her hair wind-blown, her eyes and her rapid breathing betraying the excitement she had been laboring under. When she saw Josephine, who was facing the door through which she had entered, she gasped, placing her hands over her bosom and leaned weakly against the door-jamb.

"Merciful heaven, Jo; but you did give me a scare!" she cried. "What on earth made you do it?"

Josephine had got to her feet. She had a feeling that Betty's present concern was rather hypocritical in view of her cold constraint of the preceding night. And Josephine's resentment, carefully treasured during the ride from Lattimer's to the Whitman cabin, was visible in the steady, slightly defiant smile she gave Betty.

"I just wanted to ride, I suppose. Besides Chong had n't returned, and I wanted to know how Mrs. Whitman was getting along."

Betty tried hard to smile at Josephine's belligerent tone, remembering the courtesy due her guest. But Betty could not play the hypocrite, and the smile was a failure.

She felt it was a failure. And she knew she was entitled to fair treatment, even if Jo was her guest. In an attempt to suppress the indignation she felt, she smiled brightly at Mrs. Whitman and expressed sympathy for her illness.

Then she turned to Josephine. This time her smile was gentle, inviting peace.

"You might have told me you were going, Jo," she said. "I should n't have worried. Perhaps I should have come with you. You were here all night?"

Involuntarily she glanced at Mrs. Whitman as though seeking confirmation of Josephine's rather vicious affirmative nod. Josephine's cheeks paled with anger, for she saw in Betty's glance at Mrs. Whitman a suspicion that she was not telling the truth.

"Betty, I hope you don't think I was roaming about the country all night!"

"Why, Jo!"

Betty's cheeks grew crimson. Jo's determination to quarrel was unmistakable, though the provocation was not visible. Betty had known Jo possessed a temper, but that she should suddenly become vindictive for apparently no reason at all indicated there was a side of her character which had been kept secret.

"Why, Jo!" she said; "what do you mean?"

"I think you know what I mean, Betty Lawson,"

said Josephine, coldly; her resentment having resolved itself into a determination to let Betty know that she had noted her constraint of the preceding night.

"You know exactly what I mean," she went on spitefully. "Do you think I did not notice the look you gave me when I told you about Brannon and myself having been at the ranch-house all night—while Chong and Denver were away? Oh, don't pretend, Betty!" she scoffed at Betty's gasp of astonishment. "You are jealous of any one who speaks to Brannon! You hardly looked at me last night, after I told you what had happened; you were n't even civil to me, your guest."

"Jo!" expostulated Betty vehemently, her face aflame.

"I shall not go back to the ranch-house of course," declared Josephine, her voice coldly scornful. "I could never think of forcing myself upon people who do not want me—who are afraid I am going to—"

"Why, Jo—"

"I assure you I do not want Brannon," said Josephine, smiling vindictively at Betty's obvious confusion—a confusion, Josephine thought, brought on by the knowledge that her secret was known to the other. "Brannon is n't the kind of man I 'd care to spend the remainder of my days with.

"But I saved him from Cole Meeder—saved him

for you. For I lied to Meeder; I lied to you; I lied to Mrs. Whitman. You knew I lied to you, Betty; for you took the trouble to show me you did. If I had n't lied, Cole Meeder and his men would have hanged Brannon! For Callahan did n't attack me! I was in the house when I heard the shot; and when I opened the door Callahan was lying dead on the veranda. And Brannon was standing close to him, a pistol in his hand!"

For an instant, as Betty covered her face with her hands, Josephine regretted the tempestuous confession. But a perverse impulse seemed to have seized her, and she met Betty's agonized look with one of cold indifference.

As Betty flung out of the door, Josephine took one step after her; then she stood rigid, pale, and defiant, listening to drumming hoof-beats that rapidly receded.

It was out, now; and no one had "wheedled" it out of her. She had yielded to the passionate resentment which had been growing upon her all morning through the continued contemplation of the fancied ill-treatment accorded her by Betty; but she was certain she would have said nothing had she not been half crazed by the nervous strain brought on by the incident of the finding of Artwell and the long night ride into the ghostly silence of the big basin.

She never had acted that way before; she never

before had experienced the violent passions that had seethed through her all morning. It seemed she had changed overnight; she felt that the veneer of civilization had been stripped from her, revealing her as a creature of primitive impulses, of atavic urges. For an instant as she stood looking at the closed door, she was in danger of succumbing to hysteria; but she heard Mrs. Whitman's voice, calm, gentle, soothing:

"Come here, my dear."

And then she was on her knees in front of the invalid, her head in the other's lap. Mrs. Whitman's hands, light, consoling, were smoothing her hair; and the woman's voice was coming, calmly as before:

"There, there, my dear. I understand—I understand. It must have been a terrible trial to you, and I don't wonder that you lost your self-control. This is a grim, cruel country, my dear—to those who have ideals and the courage to fight for them."

CHAPTER XX

IN Lattimer's code of ethics it was no crime to take what one wanted. And because he was a supreme egotist he acknowledged no moral law except that which governed his own desires. The God men talked of he had not seen; and he would have none of the doctrine that prohibits the taking of life, even if that life belonged to a friend. He was what Betty Lawson had termed him: "a ruthless, smiling devil."

He acknowledged a wholesome respect for Brannon; yet had not that respect been tinged with fear he would have found some excuse to quarrel with the man when the latter had visited him on the morning Josephine Hamilton had brought Les Artwell to his house.

Had Lattimer been a mere murderer he would have permitted Denver to use the rifle he had picked up when Brannon had halted his horse at the edge of the Lazy L veranda that morning. But murder, such as stabbing a man in the back or shooting him without warning, never had been Lattimer's method. If he sought a man's life he gave him what must seem to the other an even chance, though in reality the victim would have no chance at all.

In the case of Brannon, a satanic impulse to play with the man had been the influence which had impelled him to warn Denver not to use the rifle.

The incident of the killing of Callahan had provided Lattimer with an opportunity to dispose of Brannon without bringing upon himself or his men the burden of blame; and the discovery that Josephine had lied to save Brannon would simplify his plans.

He wanted Josephine; he meant to have her. From the day he had heard from Denver how the girl had frustrated Brannon's plan to hang Les Artwell, he had admired her spirit. When he had carried her from the spot where she had fainted after bringing Les Artwell almost to the door of his house, the passion she had aroused in him had been deeper and more violent than he had felt for any woman. While talking with her on the veranda he had sternly repressed his passions, lest she feel them and become frightened. But his determination to have her was as deep as ever.

After Brannon rode away, Lattimer picked up Josephine's handkerchief, brushed the dirt from it, smoothed it out on his knee, and gazed speculatively at it.

He decided Brannon had not seen it, and yet a doubt assailed him. Brannon was a man who kept his emotions to himself; he was crafty, subtle,

keen-witted, and his veiled warning upon leaving indicated that he considered his suspicions well founded. Did Brannon know that Josephine had visited the Lazy L? Had he been referring to the girl when he had asked if Lattimer had seen "a rider with two saddles pass this way?"

If Brannon did know the girl had visited the Lazy L, his knowledge would make the game more interesting for Lattimer; it would make Lattimer's ultimate triumph more complete, for he would have the satisfaction of beating Brannon in spite of the latter's knowledge.

There was no occasion for haste in the prosecution of his plan to dispose of Brannon. Knowing, through Les Artwell's story and through his questioning of Josephine, that Brannon did not kill Callahan, Lattimer was aware that Brannon felt he was doing the girl a service in taking the blame for the shooting. And of course he would not assume responsibility for the deed if he knew that Les Artwell had been near the Triangle L that night. Being ignorant of Artwell's part in the affair, and desiring to shield Josephine, Brannon would take no offensive action—conceding he knew of Josephine's visit to the Lazy L—until he was certain the girl would not be involved.

There were faults in Lattimer's reasoning, and he was aware of some of them; yet the outstanding fact was that Brannon had merely warned him

when if he had positive evidence, or even a strong suspicion, he would have acted instantly.

At noon of the day following Brannon's visit, Lattimer rode up to the gate of the Whitman horse corral and dismounted. He looked around for Ben, but the latter was not visible, and Lattimer walked to the house, entering after his heavy knocking at the door brought a hospitable "Come in!" from Mrs. Whitman.

The invalid's welcoming smile was faint. In the bright eyes was a hint of perturbation, of anxiety.

"Sit down, John," she said. And then, before Lattimer could settle firmly into the chair, she asked eagerly, anxiously:

"John, have you had a doctor for Les?"

"He is n't hurt much, Mother Whitman," consoled Lattimer. "Not bad enough to have a doctor. He 's just weak; he 's lost a lot of blood."

"Oh, my!" she sighed, "Why can't Les be different? Why don't you talk to him, John?"

Lattimer flushed under the deep appeal of her voice.

"I 've talked, Mother Whitman. It does n't seem to do any good. Les is headstrong."

Mrs. Whitman folded her hands resignedly. "I wonder which of my two afflictions will take me," she smiled; "Les, or this?" she turned the palms of her emaciated hands upward, with a gesture of mute hoplessness.

"I don't remember having sinned enough to deserve either affliction," she said. "Though I presume God knows why I am selected. My first husband was just like Les." She blushed. "But of course you know that; your father must have told you about him; your father knew him before I married him.

"Les always was headstrong," she went on. "He would n't mind. He got worse after his father died and I married Mr. Whitman. And he always seemed to resent Ben. I 've thought I made a mistake in marrying again; but Ben never crossed Les; he always let Les have his own way and was very kind to him. But Les always was vindictive; and he left home before we came here."

"And never hinted to anybody about you being his mother," said Lattimer. "He's a strange boy."

"That was because he resents Ben," said Mrs. Whitman. "I believe I would have been more satisfied if he had n't come here at all," she went on, "for then I would n't know of the things he has done. "John," she added in a low, apprehensive voice, "did Les kill Tim Callahan?"

"I 'm afraid he did, Mother," reluctantly answered Lattimer.

Mrs. Whitman drew her breath sharply, but the only evidence of emotion that was visible to Lattimer was in her birdlike eyes, which were shining

through a mist of tears that the man knew would not be shed.

"How do you know, John?"

"He told me."

Mrs. Whitman shuddered. She leaned forward, whispering, the material instinct to provide protection for her offspring seeking a way to save him from the punishment that would inevitably follow if his guilt became known.

"John," she said, "does Brannon know?"

Lattimer shook his head negatively, though not with conviction.

"Are you sure?" she persisted. "You can't tell about Brannon; he is so silent, so deep, so clever at anticipating the actions of others."

"I reckon Brannon don't know," said Lattimer. "I 'm intending to keep him from knowing until I get Les well and get him out of the country. I rode over to tell you about Les, thinking that Hamilton girl would n't get it straight. I want to get word to her some way that you want her to come and nurse Les. I 'd go myself, but I 'm afraid Betty Lawson would suspect something. Have Ben ride over to the Triangle L and tell the Hamilton girl you want her for company for a few days. Then she can sneak over to my place and take care of Les."

"Miss Hamilton is staying here now, John," said Mrs. Whitman. "She and Betty quarreled." Her

keen eyes, were fixed steadily upon Lattimer's, and she saw the deep exultant gleam that came into them.

But Lattimer's voice was low, even. "What did they quarrel about?"

"Miss Hamilton was not quite herself. She felt offended because she thought Betty doubted the story she told about shooting Callahan. She admitted she had lied; she said Brannon killed Callahan without her knowledge."

Lattimer frowned; then he smiled. If Betty told Brannon about Josephine's charge, Brannon would hear no more than he already knew. But if the story got to Cole Meeder's ears before Lattimer was ready, Lattimer could not be sure that Josephine would not deny the confession in order to keep Meeder from hanging Brannon.

"Miss Hamilton does n't know who killed Callahan," said Mrs. Whitman. "I knew, the instant I heard about it, that she did n't do it. I think she sincerely believes Brannon did it. But I—I knew, John. Just as soon as Miss Hamilton told me about finding Les in the Triangle L stable, I knew Les was the—the murderer. But I could n't let Betty know."

"Let Miss Hamilton go on thinking Brannon did it," said Lattimer. "If she finds out Les did it she'll blurt it out some day; she's that kind."

Lattimer got up. He succeeded in making the

gravity of his expression impressive, so that Mrs. Whitman, watching him, drew her breath tremulously.

"What is it, John?"

"I reckon I 'll have to get back to the ranch. Les is alone. He 'll need care, if he 's to pull through. Where 's Ben?"

"He went down the river. To Boskin's ford. He 's thinking of driving some cattle over to-morrow."

"Where is Miss Hamilton?"

"She went with Ben, John." Noting the quick fire that smoldered in Lattimer's eyes, she added: "She did n't want to leave me, but she looked so pale and tired this morning that I thought the ride would do her good."

"Just as well she ain't here, maybe," said Lattimer. "It would n't look right for me to ask her; but Les has sure got to have a woman's care. We can't get Betty Lawson; there 's no other woman in the basin, except you. And you can't go. The women in Willets won't do. I reckon it 's got to be Miss Hamilton.

"Maybe she won't want to come. It 'll be your job to make her see that she ought to come. She pities Les—thinks he is being persecuted. Make her come, even if you have to tell her the truth—that Les is your son. That 'll bring her," he added, smiling grimly. "If it does n't, you might remind

her that you lied to Betty about where she spent the biggest part of a night!"

"Lattimer!"

The passionate reproach in Mrs. Whitman's voice and eyes brought a deep color to the man's cheeks.

"That 's all right," he said soothingly; "I just wanted to impress upon you how badly Les needs her."

He halted in the doorway and looked back as though he had suddenly thought of something more.

"Have Miss Hamilton come over to-night," he said; "I 'll be waiting for her."

CHAPTER XXI

JOSEPHINE HAMILTON was able to look back upon her week's stay at the Lattimer ranch with a rather amused complacency.

In the first place, the startling unconventionality of her action in coming had not seemed so much of a violation of the proprieties after all, because a life had been in jeopardy. Besides, her presence at the Lattimer ranch was known only to those most interested, and would never be known to the outside world. Even Betty would be kept in ignorance.

But Mrs. Whitman had been compelled to use her final argument in an effort to induce Josephine to come, that of confessing to the girl that Les Artwell was her son. Incidentally the confession had explained to Josephine the reason for Lattimer's positive assurance that Mrs. Whitman would lie for Les Artwell.

Artwell was getting better. His improvement had not been rapid, but he was growing undeniably stronger, and his cheeks were revealing signs of restored circulation. And Josephine's sympathies were more firmly established than ever.

Lattimer had ridden away a short time before;

and Josephine was sitting in a rocker on the veranda, thinking of him.

The night was much like another that she would always remember—the night Tim Callahan had been shot to death. A big moon, minus a quarter, was streaming its mellow flood into the big basin, disclosing the farther reaches of the slumberous green bowl, touching hilltops with a luminous splendor, filling the valleys and draws with mystery.

Lattimer had treated her fairly and honorably. He had not forced himself upon her; he had permitted her as much privacy as she desired.

To be sure, she had noticed that at times he seemed to be watching her speculatively, with an expression that could not be mistaken. But she was not a prude, and she realized that Lattimer's admiring glances were not more offensive than those she had received from other men in an environment which was supposed to produce gentlemen.

Also, being a woman, Josephine was not averse to being admired. She had a subconscious impression that it was nature's scheme to make women so that they would be admired of men, and she would have been disappointed to find that her charms were negligible.

Lattimer's evident ability sternly to repress his passions gave her confidence in him. Passion for her was in his heart, she knew; and though the knowledge was strangely satisfying to her, she was

afraid of it because it was a new emotion to her, and she did n't know enough of the passions of men to be able to determine just how far she could permit them to go and still be able gracefully to retreat.

Her impulses were not those of the coquette. Had she been inclined to flirt with Lattimer her course would have been simple. She was serious; she earnestly tried to analyze her feelings toward the man; and she did not intend to permit herself to surrender her independence in the slightest degree until she was convinced of Lattimer's entire worthiness and of her own intentions.

But she knew that during the week the man's intense magnetism had gripped her, had made a powerful appeal to her imagination. Several times while going about her tasks she had caught herself mentally dramatizing the moment of her surrender to him; and during his absence from the ranch-house she could always see him. At such times, realizing that the moment of surrender might come, she was afraid of herself.

She thought she knew why Lattimer intrigued her interest. It was because he was different from the men she had been accustomed to seeing in the East. It was because, having passed her days in the society of people of refinement, she craved a change. She felt that she must always have had a subconscious admiration for the primitive; that

the repression that had governed the actions of all the people of her acquaintance merely masked their natural impulses toward reversion to type.

Eastern men were undoubtedly just as manly as the Western males she had met. The difference was that the Western male, not having had some of the advantages of civilization, was more direct of speech, more natural than his Eastern brother.

She was beginning to feel that at heart she was Western. In the life she had known something had been lacking. She had always felt an urge to be an individual quite apart from others; she had wanted to do things in an original way, to follow her own impulses, to be a force in life. She was half convinced her action in arbitrarily insisting that Brannon yield to her wishes in their several clashes was a manifestation of dormant capacity to rule.

She believed that was why she liked Lattimer. He typified her conception of the ideal man—big, handsome, vital, electric, vibrant with power and force, elemental in thought and action, dominant and individualistic.

At first she had thought Brannon was the ideal man. She saw her mistake now. And that was why her subconscious mind had fought against yielding to the lure of him. Brannon was n't *the* man. He was too self-confident, too inflexible, too irritatingly conscious of his ability to rule.

She believed she felt a vindictive delight in op-

posing him; certainly in her heart at this instant was a grim satisfaction over the knowledge that, until now, at least, she had kept him from hanging Les Artwell.

She was no longer mystified over her action in defying Betty Lawson. She felt that the sudden accession of passion which had driven her to the break with her friend had been merely an involuntary demonstration of a new independence of thought. She had discovered the primitive in her character, the elemental instinct to fight to defend herself from aggression. The old inclination to depend upon custom and convention had gone: it had been succeeded by a consciousness of power, by a satisfying confidence in her ability to achieve her own destiny. She was an integral part of the country she thought she had feared, but which she really loved; she was Western, in mind and heart.

"It 's perfect," she returned.

"How is Les?"

"He is much better."

She had been wondering why he did not put the horse away. She now looked sharply at him, and for the first time became aware that he was changed from the Lattimer she had grown to know.

He was watching her closely, and she saw that his eyes were intent, cold, and a-gleam with a speculation that somehow impressed her as being sinister. His lips were in straight, hard lines, with the merest suggestion of a wanton, whimsical smile in the corners.

She caught her breath sharply, her thoughts leaping instantly to Brannon and Artwell. Evidently Lattimer divined her thoughts, for he stepped forward, placed both his hands on her shoulders; and as she got to her feet in response to the dread fear that tugged at her, he leaned forward and looked into her eyes, searchingly, speculatively.

"How brave are you?" he asked abruptly.

She found no words with which to answer. The intensity of his gaze, the surprising suddenness of the question, brought on mental incoherence.

"Brave enough to play the string out?" he asked. "I reckon you know what has happened," he said, laughing softly with mirth. "Brannon is suspicious. I 've got a man in the Star outfit and one with the Triangle L. There 's a lot of mysterious talk go-

ing around. We 've got to get Artwell away from here before Brannon's suspicions become too strong." She felt his fingers tighten on her shoulders. "Are you brave enough to go with Artwell and me to a place where Artwell will be safe?"

She nodded affirmatively without any definite idea of what would be required of her. She understood that Artwell was in danger, and in this crisis she was conscious only of a savagely intense desire—a determination—to save him.

She felt the muscles of Lattimer's arm stiffen; he drew a deep breath; his eyes gleamed brightly in the clear moonlight.

"Good!" he said, his voice carrying an exultant note: "I 'll get things ready."

He gripped her shoulders tightly, though she somehow got the impression that the grip was meant as a caress. Vaguely disturbed, suddenly disquieted by his evident haste, she asked haltingly as he dropped his hands from her shoulders:

"Do—do you mean that you are going now—right away?"

"As soon as I can get horses ready." He was about to step down from the veranda but at her question he halted and looked back at her.

"You 're staying game, are n't you?" he said, grimly bantering her.

"Of course. But—where are we going?"

"It 's perfect," she returned.

"How is Les?"

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"Of course. But—where are we going?"

"It 'll be Laskar, I reckon. You 're not afraid, are you?"

"No!" she declared, defiantly. "But Laskar is far is n't it?"

"Fifty miles."

"Do you think Artwell can stand it?"

"He 'll have to. I reckon he 'd rather ride than swing. You go in and ask him while I get the horses ready. Mine 's done; I 'll have to get a fresh one."

"Why," she said, "do you mean that Brannon—that some one—has been after you?

"Not as bad as that," he laughed as he stepped to the ground. "I 've just got wind that Brannon is suspicious, and I 'm getting Artwell away in time. Don't get excited. We 'll take our time and be in Laskar by sun-up, all regular and safe. We 'll turn Artwell over to some friends of his there, and you can go back to Whitman's."

Reassured by his voice, which she thought held a note of humorous tolerance for her fears, she went in to Artwell.

Artwell was asleep, and when she awakened him to tell him what impended, he sat up, pale of face and visibly fearful. For the first time the girl got a glimpse of the man's real character; she saw the serpent malignity of his soul lying naked in his eyes, and she shudderingly turned away.

"You won't go back on me, now, ma'am?"

He had grasped one of her hands and was gripping it tightly. "I 'm in pretty bad shape, ma'am. But that would n't make any difference to Brannon. He 'd swing me, anyway. But he won't, if you 're with me."

"'Brannon won't hang you if I can prevent it," she told Artwell.

When she went out of the room to get her belongings together, Artwell was getting up, muttering in a hoarse undertone something about Brannon, the Triangle L, Callahan, and Cole Meeder.

By the time she had got her things into a slicker that Mrs. Whitman had given her when she had ridden to the Lazy L to nurse Artwell back to health—various articles of wearing-apparel that Ben Whitman had brought over from the Triangle L at her request—Artwell had got his clothes on and was standing in the outside doorway. He was a pallid, sullen ghost of his former self, and a look into his wildly staring eyes sent a shiver over her. But when she saw him sway unsteadily and hang weakly to one of the door-jambs she ran to him, remorseful, pitying. He was only a boy, after all; Mrs. Whitman's erring offspring, misguided, of course, and sullenly defiant toward a world that had persecuted him. No wonder he was resentful!

Lattimer had the horses ready. She held one horse while Lattimer lifted Artwell into the saddle; she was helped upon another horse by Lattimer—

not Chesterfield, for she had sent him home by Ben Whitman—and when Lattimer himself climbed on his mount the three rode around a corner of the ranch-house and headed into the moon haze southward.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER his talk with Lattimer at the Lazy L ranch-house Brannon had headed the black horse toward the Whitman cabin. But he did not stop at the cabin. He had intended to stop, but when he reached a timber clump that surrounded the level near the Whitman buildings, he halted the black and sat motionless in the saddle, to gaze saturninely at Chesterfield, who was being turned into the horse corral by Ben Whitman.

There could be no doubt now concerning the ownership of the woman's handkerchief that Lattimer had covered with his boot while he had been talking. Josephine had helped Les Artwell to get to Lattimer's ranch, had dropped her handkerchief at the edge of the veranda and had then ridden to the Whitman cabin.

That Ben Whitman was just caring for her horse indicated that she had only recently arrived; and when Brannon saw a saddle hanging on the top rail of the corral fence—a saddle which he recognized as belonging to the Triangle L—he knew it had just been removed from Chesterfield, for Ben Whitman was notoriously particular, and would not neglect it.

Brannon scanned the corral and the level around the cabin for sight of Betty's horse. Betty had not yet come, it seemed, though she should have reached the cabin long ago. But Betty, he reflected, had been excited and anxious, and there was a possibility that she had ridden miles out of her way on a chance that Josephine had strayed from the dim trail leading from the Triangle L to the Whitman cabin. She would be beset with conflicting impulses, and would yield to some of them.

A little later, still sitting quietly in the saddle, Brannon smiled in self-vindication, for he saw a dust-cloud sweeping toward the Whitman cabin from the north, and ahead of the cloud was Betty. She had been far off the trail.

Brannon waited. There was now no occasion for him to make his presence known, and he intended to circle the cabin without letting himself be seen. Later he would join the outfit.

He saw Betty ride up, dismount, wave a hand at Ben Whitman and enter the cabin. He observed that Ben Whitman made haste to get Chesterfield's saddle out of sight—which was a suspicious circumstance that caused Brannon's brows to come together in a puzzled frown.

Whitman's stealthy haste, together with Betty's abrupt exit from the cabin within a very few minutes after her entrance, coupled with the fact that Betty was crying when she came out, were per-

plexing incidents that caused Brannon to change his mind about joining the outfit.

He saw Betty mount her horse and ride furiously eastward toward the Triangle L; he saw Ben Whitman wag his head with an odd, negative motion at the sight. But Chesterfield stayed in the corral.

Brannon made a wide circuit to avoid being seen by Ben Whitman as he rode away. It took him fully an hour to reach the Triangle L trail, but once on it he made the black horse travel fast, so that in slightly more than an hour and a half altogether he was dismounting at the Triangle L corral gates. Betty's horse was already in the corral, and Brannon strode to the ranch-house, to pound heavily on the front door that opened upon the veranda.

When Betty came toward him through the subdued light of the big room he saw that her eyes were wet and her cheeks crimson; but he pretended not to notice her agitation. He was also successful in veiling his curiosity.

"I 've looked around considerable, Betty," he said. "If she rode south she did n't leave much evidence." He thought of the handkerchief he had seen at Lattimer's. He did not intend to tell what he knew.

Brannon saw that Betty was in the grip of some strong passion. It was scornful indignation or bitter resentment; he could not tell which.

Betty's voice was cold and even.. "Miss Hamilton is visiting Mrs. Whitman, Brannon," she said.

"I thought she would n't go very far," he returned. "She explained why she went away without saying anything to you, I reckon?"

"She said she was worried about Mrs. Whitman."

There was a chilling smile on Betty's lips and a truculent set to her chin. Also, there was suspicion in the steady eyes that were probing Brannon's expression, that were studying him, trying to penetrate the mask of unconcern with which he was concealing his curiosity.

"She rode back with you?" asked Brannon.

"I believe she intends to stay with Mrs. Whitman, indefinitely," said Betty.

"Sort of a sudden decision, was n't it," smiled Brannon.

Betty's lips became tightly set; her eyes flashed.

"Apparently," she said.

"She must have got plenty tired of us," suggested Brannon.

"She was at the Whitman cabin all night, Brannon," Betty flushed. "That was one thing we quarreled about. Jo seemed to think I did n't believe she had stayed there. But I did believe her, Brannon; I was merely astonished—for I thought if she had known she intended to stay there, she might have told me. Of course I knew she had been somewhere all night, for her bed here had not been slept in. Oh, without a doubt she was there all night, Brannon; Mrs. Whitman corroborated her."

Brannon's face was expressionless, telling nothing of his thoughts, which were concerned with his latest evidence of a new link in the chain of mystery which was enmeshing Josephine Hamilton.

Mrs. Whitman had lied to protect the girl; Ben Whitman had been attempting to conceal the visible evidence of her late arrival at the Whitman cabin; and Lattimer had concealed her handkerchief with his boot. Lattimer had also hidden the saddle that had been on Billy when Artwell had ridden the horse to Lattimer's ranch; and Denver's horse had been in Lattimer's corral.

Brannon was convinced that Josephine had not knowingly joined forces with Lattimer, Artwell, and Denver. He thought she had merely co-operated with Lattimer and Artwell in order to save Artwell's life through a mistaken conception of justice—and possibly because of a deliberate determination to force her principles upon the country. But how was he to interpret the attitude of Ben and Mrs. Whitman? Were they, too, members of that organized band of thieves of which—according to the suspicion that had been growing in his mind—Satan Lattimer was the head?

Though he had respected Lattimer because of certain qualities of rugged manhood, he never had trusted the man; and beneath his cold civility toward the other there always had been a lurking

contempt, aroused over the stories that had been told regarding Lattimer's way with women.

And just at this minute he was filled with concern for Josephine, though he gazed quizzically at Betty.

"You say you quarreled with Miss Hamilton?" he said. "Well"—at her severely stiff nod—that 's too bad!"

"Brannon," she said firmly, "you are at the bottom of this. There is something about the killing of Tim Callahan that has n't been told—something that I believe both you and Jo know! When I got back from Willets Jo told me you had shot Callahan because he had attacked her. You refused to talk about it. This morning Jo declared you shot Callahan without visible provocation, and that she lied to Cole Meeder—telling him the story she told me, at first—to keep Meeder and his men from hanging you. I want to know the truth!"

"I reckon the lady would n't lie," said Brannon.

"Brannon, you did n't kill Tim Callahan. You did n't! You know you did n't! And you know who did. I want you to tell me! And I want you to tell me exactly what happened the night I was in Willets!"

Betty's faith in Brannon was great. She was positive that Brannon had not committed the crime; and at this instant she was not so much concerned over the discovery of the real murderer as she was

over the knowledge that she was outside of Brannon's intimate counsels; that he was deliberately holding her off, keeping her in ignorance of the secret that existed between himself and Josephine.

She was furiously angry with Brannon; she now hated Josephine because Josephine had dared to intimate that she was jealous of Brannon—although she knew she was jealous, and that jealousy was the force which agitated her at this instant. She stood rigid, on the verge of tears because of her conviction that Josephine did like Brannon despite her denial; because she knew that Josephine had liked Brannon from the beginning; because she was convinced that Josephine could not help liking him, as she herself liked him.

Had n't Jo questioned her about Brannon on the day they had ridden together to Mrs. Whitman's? Had n't Jo asked about Brannon's age? And had n't she commented upon Brannon's appearance, remarking in this fashion: "It 's the wind and the sun that have made him look so bronzed and rough, I suppose; and the hard life that has made his eyes seem so—so unflinchingly steady"? Was n't that evidence that Jo was interested in him? And had n't Jo told her that same day that she hated Brannon?

Perhaps Jo had thought then that she hated Brannon; but her interest in him showed that she really liked him. She had merely felt resentful toward Brannon because she had been testing his

mental strength and had found it superior to her own, and women who felt that way toward men in the beginning always fell in love with them in the end.

Jo's manner at the Whitman cabin that morning, her unprovoked and vindictive attack, together with Brannon's somewhat cynical demeanor whenever Jo's name was mentioned in his presence, convinced Betty that Jo and Brannon had quarreled, and that Jo's real reason for wanting to stay at the Whitman cabin was that she wanted to be where Brannon could not see her. And had n't Brannon been reluctant to search for Jo this morning? He had known all the time that Jo had left the Triangle L, and he had permitted her to ride over there to be insulted!

She wanted Brannon for herself; she had always wanted him. And now she was to lose him because she had foolishly invited Jo out here.

Theirs was a lovers' quarrel. They would feel bitterly resentful toward each other for a few days; but they would patch up their differences and be more in love than ever. And she would lose Brannon!

She saw that Brannon did not mean to explain; would not answer her question. For she saw his eyes glint with derision, as they always did when an opposing force challenged him, or when a contrary passion seized him.

"I 'm not doing any explaining now, Betty," he said gently.

Taking Betty into his confidence might disrupt his plans. At the least he would be compelled to go into unpleasant detail, which would involve disclosing his suspicions concerning Lattimer, Josephine, Ben Whitman, and Mrs. Whitman. Although he knew Betty was dependable, he could not afford to risk having her speak an unguarded word that would warn Lattimer, Ben Whitman, or any of them. He was convinced that—conceding Lattimer were a member of a band of thieves—there might be men in the Triangle L outfit who would carry tales to him. And with Betty and Josephine at odds there was danger that in a moment of anger Betty would say something that would give Josephine a hint of his intentions.

At his refusal he saw Betty catch her breath. Her face flamed; then paled. She looked reproachfully at him while one might have drawn a full, deep breath; then her lips quavered, were caught firmly between her teeth.

Then Brannon was alone on the veranda.

CHAPTER XXIV

A WEEK'S prowling around the open range had added no shred of evidence that would help to confirm Brannon's suspicions of Lattimer's connection with the horse-thieves. Brannon had spent one night with the Triangle L outfit on the southern range; with a plausible excuse he had visited other cow-camps; and he had subtly questioned stray riders he had met in the basin. But at the end of the week he chanced upon a Star man over near the eastern rim of the basin, who told him with sinister truculence that Meeder was looking for him.

This word came to Brannon just at dusk, and before midnight he had reached the Triangle L camp, had routed Lin Murray out, and the two were riding toward the Triangle L ranch-house.

They made a leisurely trip and got in at dawn, to be told by Chong that Betty had driven to Willets the day before and was not expected to return until afternoon.

During Brannon's pilgrimages of the last week he had observed that men who formerly had been his friends had treated him with cold reserve. Not one of them had been offensive, none had intimated

by word or sign the reason for their coldness toward him; but he knew that word of the killing of Callahan had gone abroad, and that his enemies were pointing significantly that the Star owner had been shot in the back. Even his friends must feel the shame of the incident, since they could offer no defense for him.

It had been the same wherever Brannon went; and when the Star man had told him Cole Meeder was looking for him he decided he had carried the burden of blame for the killing of Callahan long enough.

There was no reason why he should continue to shield Josephine. He was certain she had not killed Callahan; he was equally confident that Artwell had killed him, and he meant to act.

He felt he could not delay an aggressive movement against Lattimer until he secured additional evidence of the latter's complicity, for delay would give Lattimer time to get acquainted with Josephine, time to strengthen the insidious bond that was already between them by reason of Josephine's secret visit to the Lazy L.

Brannon had decided he could not hope to convict Lattimer with the evidence he already had; but the fact that Lattimer had taken Les Artwell in would create in the minds of the cattle-men of the section a suspicion of Lattimer's honesty which was certain to result in increased watchfulness.

However, the real reason behind Brannon's impatience to act was concern for Josephine. A stranger to the customs of a cruel, grim country, she had been recklessly eager in her endeavor to force upon the country certain principles she had brought with her, and had been drawn into the company of men whose influence would certainly destroy her. He meant to save her from the folly of her own unwise impulses.

He had brought Lin Murray in with him that the latter might prepare the mess and bunk-houses for the return of the outfit on the morrow; and when he and Murray reached the ranch Murray dropped wearily down upon a bench outside of one of the bunk-houses.

"I 'm thinkin' a heap of gettin' some sleep before I start hoein' out," he said.

"All right, Murray," said Brannon. "I 'm taking a look around."

Five minutes later Murray was in a bunk, snoring peacefully. Brannon cared for Murray's horse, riding his own and leading Murray's to the stable, where he fed and watered them. Then he went to his shack, cleaned and oiled his six-shooter, and emerged from the doorway just in time to see Cole Meeder and half a dozen Star men turn a corner of the ranch-house and ride toward him at a slow lope.

The Star men saw him instantly, and Meeder,

riding slightly in advance of the others, quickened the stride of his horse.

Brannon advanced to meet the men. They rode up silently and surrounded him, sitting on their horses, somberly watchful, their eyes alert and coldly truculent.

Meeder dismounted and walked toward Brannon, halting at a little distance, his eyes gleaming with passion. His body was bent forward slightly from the hips; his right arm was held out from his side, the elbow significantly crooked; his left hand was clenched, his legs were a-sprawl. In his manner was a threat of violence, imminent and deadly.

Brannon smiled steadily into the blazing eyes of the other, paying no attention to the mounted men.

"Something bothering you, Meeder?" he said.

"You 're damned right!" said Meeder, his voice hoarse with passion. "We 've come to swing you, Brannon!" He paused, tensed, straining, evidently awaiting—expecting—a hostile movement.

None came. Brannon's gaze was unwavering.

"You 're telling me what for, Meeder?" he questioned, quietly.

"For killin' Tim Callahan!" said Meeder explosively. "You 've been pretty slick, Brannon, gettin' that Hamilton girl to take the blame, an' squirmin' out from under yourself. But we 've got you now!"

Meeder laughed, harshly, derisively.

"You was a fool to place any dependence on a woman anyway, Brannon. I 'll tell you that before we swing you. They ain't to be trusted. One day they 'll think enough of a man to lie to keep him from swingin', an' the next day they'll get stuck on another man!"

"Meaning what, Meeder?"

"Shucks!" scoffed Meeder. He leaned forward and peered closely at Brannon. "Do you mean to tell me you don't know?" he demanded. "I 'll swear you don't" he added, in huge astonishment.

"Well then, listen hard, Brannon! This will be news to you. That Hamilton girl is livin' with Lattimer at the Lazy L. Been there a whole week —ever since the day after you downed Callahan! That gets you—eh, 'Steel'?" he jeered as he saw Brannon's eyelashes flicker with the only emotion he betrayed.

"It takes a heap to make Steel Brannon show human; but that news done it!"

Brannon's emotion was not what Meeder thought it was. To him, Meeder's news merely indicated that Josephine had gone to Lattimer's house to nurse Les Artwell. Artwell must have been badly wounded.

"Who told you that, Meeder?"

"Lattimer," declared the other. "He come over to the Star the day before yesterday. He 's got pretty confidential with Miss Hamilton, I reckon.

Says he 's goin' to marry her, an' that she 's willin' to tell the truth about the killin' of Callahan. Accordin' to Lattimer, she claims you done the shootin'. Goes back on her other story complete. Says she was in the house when the shot was fired, and that when she come out Callahan was down an' you was standin' there with a gun in your hand!"

He cast a significant glance at the sullen-faced men surrounding himself and Brannon; he straightened, spoke shortly:

"I reckon that 's enough for us, Brannon!" He jerked a hand sharply toward one of the mounted men, and the man dexterously began to uncoil a rope that was looped at the saddle-horn.

Brannon was conscious of the danger that confronted him. The Star men were convinced of his guilt, and would certainly hang him if he could not produce evidence of his innocence.

"I 'd deserve hanging if I had killed Tim, boys," he said quietly. "And I don't mind telling you that I lied about the shooting to protect Miss Hamilton. I thought she did it; but I discovered later that Les Artwell is the murderer."

Meeder laughed mockingly; the other men sneered audibly.

"Sure," said Meeder; "Artwell done it. You tried to swing him off; the girl would n't let you; an' now Artwell 's come back, aimin' to give you a chance to do it over. You can't hand us any of

that kind of ranikaboo, Brannon—we won't swallow it. Where 's Artwell now?" he grinned.

"Miss Hamilton took him over to Lattimer's," said Brannon.

Meeder started; peered intently at Brannon.

"How do you know that, Brannon?" he questioned.

Brannon caught the interested note in the Star foreman's voice. The peculiar eagerness of it indicated that Meeder had secretly been hoping that Brannon would be able to clear himself, although through a sense of duty he would not have hesitated to hang him. There had always been much mutual respect between Meeder and Brannon.

"Evidence," said Brannon. With the men listening attentively he related to Meeder how he had found the Lazy L horse, saddled and bridled, standing near the lean-to on the morning after Meeder's previous visit to the Triangle L; how he had searched the slicker, to find evidence that it belonged to Artwell. He spoke of the crimson stains on the straw in the stable, of the bloody finger-prints on the stable door; of the missing Billy—which he had later discovered, saddleless, and of his seeing Denver's horse in the Lattimer corral, and of Lattimer's action in covering the woman's handkerchief with his boot.

"If you 're in a hurry to swing me, you can start right now, Meeder," he concluded. "But if you 've

got a couple of hours' time that you might want to squander finding the man who *did* shoot Callahan in the back, you might take a look at the stable, and then ride with me over to Lattimer's. We 'll find Artwell there; and maybe Billy's saddle."

Meeder's manner was that of grave uncertainty. He cast a searching glance into the faces of the mounted men surrounding him, seeming silently to inquire of them their opinions regarding the strange and unexpected development. Observing the bright interest with which the men met his gaze, Meeder said shortly:

"We 're waitin', Brannon."

Watchful, alert, as though only partly convinced, the riders followed Brannon to the stable, Meeder leading his own animal and walking beside Brannon.

The men grouped themselves at the stable door and examined the stains on the jamb; they followed Brannon inside and stood silently inspecting the straw where Artwell had lain. When they emerged from the stable their swift glances into one another's eyes betrayed their eagerness to accept, with some reservations, the evidence of Artwell's presence in the stable.

"Them spots show some one was layin' in the straw," said Meeder. "They show that some one was hit bad. That 's all right as far as it goes. I reckon we 'll ride over to Lattimer's. We 'll trail you, Brannon," he added significantly.

Without waking the sleeping Murray, without even mentioning that the Triangle L puncher was in the bunk-house, Brannon saddled and bridled the black horse, mounted him, and rode southward, the Star men trailing after him.

Meeder rode close behind Brannon, saying nothing. The riders behind Meeder muttered occasionally, though for the better part of the time there was no sound except the steady, rapid drumming of hoofs and the incessant creaking of saddle-leather.

The morning was still young when the cavalcade halted near the Lazy L corral gates. In almost the same formation that had marked their ride, the men approached the Lattimer ranch-house.

There was no response to Brannon's call, or to Meeder's peremptory summons. Then, impatiently indicating that the Star men were to watch Brannon, Meeder mounted the veranda and entered the house.

After an interval he emerged, grinning ironically, He jerked out his six-shooter, covered Brannon, and laughed harshly:

"Looks like Steel was just playin' a little joke on us, boys," he said. "Les Artwell ain't here; Miss Hamilton ain't here; Lattimer ain't here—nobody 's here. I reckon they 've all gone away to Lattimer's weddin'!"

CHAPTER XXV

FROM the time the three left the Lazy L ranch-house Les Artwell lagged behind. It was evident he was not as strong as Josephine and Lattimer thought him, for he rode holding hard to the saddle-horn and swaying perilously. But he was eager to get away, and had no complaints to make when occasionally Josephine rode close to speak to him. Lattimer seemed uninterested and rode ahead, saying little.

Josephine rode forward afflicted with strange misgivings. At the ranch-house it had seemed to be a perfectly natural thing for her to agree to accompany Lattimer and Artwell to Laskar; but once she had actually started and was well into the engulfing silence of the big basin, she began to have grave doubts concerning the wisdom of making the trip. The farther she drew away from the ranch-house the more she doubted, until, after several miles had been traveled, she became nervously apprehensive.

Still, as nothing happened, she rode on, at last resolutely keeping her thoughts upon Artwell. She

rode close to him, talking to him occasionally, observing that he seemed to be growing weaker.

At first the horses had traveled over a big level, which they took at a slow lope, swinging along with the easy motion peculiar to the plains animal accustomed to long journeys and instinctively aware that strength must be conserved; then they swept around the bases of some low hills and toiled tortuously to the crest of a rocky acclivity which turned out to be a narrow ridge whose farther slope took them into a saccaton flat.

It was a broken section of country, and there seemed to be no trail such as one might expect to find leading to a town. But Lattimer seemed to have no difficulty in going ahead, for he rode steadily, looking back once in a while, apparently to note the distance between himself and the others.

Josephine did not regret having helped Artwell, but she began to wish that circumstances had not conspired to have her on the train on the particular day upon which she had met the man. In fact she now looked wistfully backward over the elapsed days, wondering why she had come to such a rough, grim, cruel country at all!

Yet instantly she was remorseful, for it seemed to her that her fortuitous presence on the train and her subsequent activities on behalf of Les Artwell had saved him from a fate which would have crushed Mrs. Whitman.

That thought stimulated her flagging courage. Mrs. Whitman's pale, delicate face and quietly courageous birdlike eyes were vivid in her mental vision as she rode.

They got out of the saccaton flat and began to ascend a slope. They went on for a long time, Lattimer in the lead, riding slowly. Artwell trailing behind. Up, up, they rode, the floor of the basin growing dim behind them. After a time they reached a rock level which was little more than a ledge. Here Lattimer brought his horse to a halt and wheeled so that he faced the back trail.

Horse and man seemed to be of heroic size in Josephine's vision as she urged her own animal toward the ledge; and with the moonlight shining fairly upon them and bringing into sharp relief every detail of the wild background, there was drawn, as with a stroke of a giant brush, a picture which appealed to all that was primitive in the girl.

And yet, strangely, she was frightened. As her horse clambered to the ledge and came to a halt, grunting with relief, she saw that Lattimer was not paying any attention to her. Nor did he even glance at Artwell as the latter brought his horse to a halt on the ledge and sat swaying wearily in the saddle.

Lattimer's gaze was directed downward into the basin. His face was expressionless, and it appeared to Josephine that he had stopped here merely to

breathe the horses. She urged her own animal close to Artwell's and asked him how he was standing the ride.

"All right," he answered thinly. Then he closed his eyes and appeared to be resting, leaning against the high pommel of the saddle.

Josephine wheeled her horse and looked out and down. Instantly she was impressed with the sharp ascent of the trail they had traveled; to her inexperienced eye it seemed almost precipitous.

As a matter of fact they were half-way up a slope that led to a mesa—one of those levels that from the veranda of the Triangle L ranch-house had seemed to her like a narrow terrace. The slope that formed the rim of the basin was still many miles distant behind them.

And yet, gazing out and down, the floor of the basin seemed dim and far to Josephine. In the ghostly haze that swathed the big hollow, the hills they had circled appeared to be merely insignificant excrescences, slight corrugations upon a level. The flats themselves were no more than patches; dark where grass grew, a dull gray on the barrens.

Remote, formless, were other salient features of the valley; they were blots that seemed somberly to lurk in the shadows of distances, their rugged outlines softened by the moon radiance. The liquid silver of a river caught her gaze; she followed its

sinuous course eastward until it was lost to her vision in the dim, wispy tracery of the trees.

She was so engrossed with the beauty of the picture that a sound from Lattimer startled her. She glanced quickly at him, to see that he was smiling contemptuously. The sound he had made had been a sneer.

He was still gazing downward. And now, as though aware that she had observed his interest, he spoke shortly.

"Some one is trailing us. I aim to find out who it is."

"Brannon?" she ejaculated apprehensively.

"I don't think it's Brannon," he said. "He's too big for Brannon. He's been trailing us for quite a while. I saw him when we crossed that ridge down there." He pointed.

"What shall we do?" she inquired.

"We'll wait here, I reckon," he said. "He's coming."

Intently scrutinizing the back trail, Josephine was at last able to distinguish a blot that seemed to be moving steadily toward them. The blot was still a little distance out into the basin and was moving rapidly; and while she watched it she saw it reach the bottom of the slope and begin to mount, now coming forward with irregular movement. The blot became a horse and rider.

They were half-way up the slope when Josephine

detected something familiar in the outlines of the man.

"It 's Ben Whitman!" she exclaimed.

"You 've got mighty good eyes," said Lattimer. "It 's Whitman."

At the word, Artwell seemed to revive.

"Whitman!" he sneered. "What in hell 's he trailin' us for? He 's always hornin' in, damn him!"

Lattimer laughed.

"Your brotherly affection don't seem to run very deep, Les," he said, sneeringly.

Artwell muttered unintelligibly, and again slumped against the saddlehorn. This time his body was inert, as though the effort of talking had overtaxed him.

Staring affrightedly at him, Josephine saw him topple and begin to pitch forward jerkily, as though he realized he was going to fall and was exerting his failing muscles to stay in the saddle.

She cried sharply to Lattimer, but he paid no attention, seeming to be intent upon watching Whitman, who was now close and coming rapidly.

Seeing that Lattimer did not intend to help Artwell Josephine slipped off her horse and ran to him. She was too late, though, for just as she reached him he tumbled forward, clutched weakly at the horse's neck, missed it, and fell heavily on his right shoulder.

Josephine screamed. There was something terribly final in the way Artwell had fallen, and the ashen gray of his face when she frenziedly turned him over upon his back told her plainly that, innocent or guilty, he had escaped the laws of men.

She was kneeling beside Artwell's body, dazedly comprehending that further effort to help him would be useless, overcome with an oppressing conviction of her complete impotence, when Whitman's horse clambered to the ledge and heaved a great sigh of relief.

The animal came to a halt facing her, and she saw its flaring nostrils, its wide, wild eyes; noted the rippling of its huge muscles, as it stood with legs braced, its strength spent in the furious climb upward.

She got one quick glimpse of Ben Whitman's face as for an instant his gaze rested on her as he brought the horse to a halt. She felt that she would never forget the expression of Whitman's eyes. There was reproach in them and pity. But greater than these two, and more intense, was rage, cold, repressed.

Then Whitman slipped off the horse and walked to Lattimer.

Josephine saw that Lattimer had dismounted. He must have got off his horse while she had been occupied with Artwell; and when Whitman approached him he stood, legs slightly apart, his hands

resting on his hips. On his lips and in his eyes was the merest shadow of a smile.

Whitman halted within a yard of Lattimer. Josephine saw the faces of both men; she noted how the smile died on Lattimer's lips; how the lips curved with malevolence; she heard how Whitman's voice leaped with passion when he spoke.

"Lattimer," he said, "I want the girl!"

"Whitman," said Lattimer, "she goes with me." His voice was smooth, in startling contrast to the violent, repressed passion in the other's.

"Where you takin' her, Lattimer?"

"It 's none of your business, Whitman," said Lattimer smoothly; "but if you must know, I 'm taking her to Laskar."

"You 're a liar!"

Whitman fell into a crouch. His right arm went up, crooked at the elbow, the fingers were spread, clawlike, above the holster at his hip.

"You 're a liar, Lattimer!" he repeated. "You 're off the Laskar trail—two miles off. You 're headin' south to Panya Cache, your hangout; yours an' the damned gang of thieves under you!

"Hell! You did n't know I knowed that—eh?" he sneered at Lattimer's start. "I 've knowed it for a year. Les let it out one day, not thinkin'.

"You 're takin' the girl there, Lattimer. You intend makin' a fool of her; you 've intended to all along. You ain't goin' to do it, I tell you! If

mother had known what a polecat you are she would n't have let the girl go over to your place, even to save Les. You 've got mother fooled, same as you 've had every one else around hyeh fooled—except me!

"I 've been on to you right along, Lattimer. I 've been ridin' sign on you an' Miss Hamilton all the time she 's been over to your place. I seen you send Denver south the day before Miss Hamilton came to your place, leadin' a pack outfit, loaded with traps you 're goin' to use in the cache. I pretty near missed you when you left last night, but I picked up your trail, an' I 'm hyeh to say you ain't takin' this girl with you!"

Stunned by the significance of Ben Whitman's words, Josephine got to her feet uncertainly as Whitman ceased speaking. As she stood erect she saw the two men standing there motionless. Then, like a flash, Whitman's clawlike fingers descended to the holster at his hip. The huge weapon was half-way out of the holster when a lance flame darted from Lattimer's side and seemed to strike Whitman in the chest. She saw Whitman straighten, stagger, straighten again, and turn partly sidewise to Lattimer, who stood watching him, a sneering smile on his lips. Then Whitman's knees sagged oddly and he pitched forward into the dust, face down.

Lattimer stood over him, pistol in hand, watching.

"I reckon you knew too much, Ben," he said.

With a slow movement Lattimer holstered the weapon and turned to Josephine, who, terrified by the tragedy she had witnessed, was watching him in dread fascination.

"Get on your horse, Miss Hamilton," he said, walking toward her; "we 've got quite a ride before us."

CHAPTER XXVI

BEFORE the sound of Meeder's voice was swallowed in the deep silence that surrounded the ranch-house, Brannon had recovered from his astonishment over the announcement that Lattimer, Artwell, and Miss Hamilton had gone. In that fleeting instant he also realized that Cole Meeder and his men would permit no further delay. That they had not found Artwell at the Lattimer ranch-house would be sufficient proof in their minds that Brannon had lied in a hope that through delay he might escape them.

Cole Meeder's sarcastic explanation of the absence of Lattimer and Miss Hamilton moved Meeder to grim mirth. He opened his mouth to laugh, and glanced at the other men with embarrassed eyes, knowing there would be times in the future when he would have to endure gibes over the easy manner in which Brannon had delayed his own execution.

When Meeder's brain again resumed its normal function he became aware that he was lying flat on his back on the porch floor, without his being conscious of how he had got there. His six-shooter

was lying a dozen feet from him, and Brannon, crouching almost at the edge of the porch, his huge gun rigid in his right hand, his eyes swimming in seeming unfixed vacuity, was holding the Star men motionless with their hands reaching skyward.

Of course Meeder had been a fool to take chances with Brannon; he knew that, now. He had known that Brannon was lightning fast on the "draw"; he well knew the man's reputation for coolness and resourcefulness in any sort of a crisis that confronted him. But what he had not known was that Brannon's voice could be so cold, smooth, and metallic.

"You boys are too quick to jump at conclusions," Brannon was saying. "I 'm wanting you to believe me when I tell you I did n't shoot Tim Callahan. I 'm making you believe me if I have to shoot the conviction into your heads!

"From now on I 'm running this outfit. I'm not going to let you hang me and live to regret it. Les Artwell was here. Miss Hamilton was here. Lattimer has taken them away. We 're going to find them. But before we pull our freight from here we 're going to find the Triangle L saddle that was on Billy when Artwell rode him over here. Finding it will show you boys that part of my story was correct, anyway!"

He singled out one of the Star men with a glance.

It was a man he knew, and the latter jumped at the sound of his voice:

"Latson, let your hands down—easy—taking care to lift your gun by taking it between your thumb and forefinger. That's it—exactly. Now, still holding it that way, drop it into the sand by the edge of the porch. Now rustle up that Triangle saddle!"

The man Latson obeyed quickly, and vanished through a doorway behind Brannon.

Brannon then disarmed the other men, using the method he had employed with Latson. He issued his orders drawlingly, with a hint of grim humor in his voice, but the Star men knew earnestness when they saw it, and all recognized the need for repression and carefulness.

Brannon's present aggressiveness was more convincing than his previous apparent peacefulness. That he was prepared to fight in order to establish his innocence could not be doubted. Holding his present advantage he might have contrived to make prisoners of the men while he rode to safety, taking their horses with him.

Cole Meeder, having received no invitation to rise, was still flat on his back on the veranda floor, rolling his head from side to side in order to watch the movements of Brannon and the others. He grinned with huge embarrassment when he realized that Brannon did not mean to escape.

"Brannon," he said, "you ain't intendin' to drag it?"

"Meeder," said Brannon, "you never had an idea that I shot Tim Callahan in the back."

"That idea has been plumb knocked out of me, Brannon—if I ever had it. If you 'd let me set up, so 's I could work my jaws better, I 'd like to say a word to the boys."

He was sitting up when Latson reappeared. Latson was carrying a saddle. He dropped it to the veranda floor, and without waiting to consult Brannon's wishes the men, Meeder included, crowded around it.

Brannon stepped back a little, watching; for he knew their childlike curiosity would quickly change to suspicion.

It was Billy's saddle. The Triangle L brand on one of the saddle-skirts was mute evidence of ownership. In this one particular, Brannon's story was true; and embarrassed grins began to show on the faces of the men.

"Looks all regular—an' correct," said one of the men.

"Mebbe we 've been millin' some," remarked another doubtfully. "That there blood in the stable, an' now the saddle—"

"When a man don't run when he 's got a chance it 's a heap more convincin'—to me—than any

saddle," interrupted Cole Meeder. "I reckon mebbe we 've been—"

He paused, his mouth open, and stared past the other men toward an open space that stretched between the veranda and the corral. Seeing his evident astonishment, the others turned also. All but Brannon, who watched the man fearing a trick.

But Meeder's movement was no part of a trick.

A horse had come into view on the level between the corral and the house. On the horse sitting erect in the saddle was Ben Whitman. Lying face down across Whitman's knees, his arms hanging limply on one side of the horse, his legs dangling on the other, was another man.

"Whitman!" exclaimed Meeder.

The group on the porch awaited Whitman's approach. He rode up to within a dozen yards of the veranda edge and brought the animal under him to a halt. And now the men on the veranda saw that the giant was ghastly pale and that he swayed slightly in the saddle.

But on his face was a smile of grim irony.

"Lookin' for Les Artwell, eh?" he said, laughing shortly. "You got hyeh a little too late, boys.

"This hyeh is Les Artwell. He 's mine, boys. I 'm takin' him home—home to his mother! Don't you boys touch him!"

His voice rose defiantly. He dropped one hand

to his pistol holster, got the weapon half-way out of its sheath. Then he swayed, drooped forward to the saddle-horn, and toppled sidewise unconscious, as the men on the veranda, Brannon first of all, ran toward him.

CHAPTER XXVII

WHILE Josephine Hamilton stayed at Lattimer's ranch-house caring for Les Artwell, Betty Lawson might have found plenty of opportunity to nurse her resentment for her guest. But she did nothing of the kind.

She resolutely kept her thoughts from dwelling upon the quarrel, deciding that Jo's temper had got the better of her and expecting, knowing something of her guest's character, that one day she would ride over to the Triangle L and make peace.

But Betty could not so easily dismiss thoughts of Brannon. Of course if Brannon preferred Jo to her, he was welcome to her; though she was positive she would never get over the hurt. Still she told herself, with a defiance that was almost satisfying, she did n't want a man that she would have to "run" after, and though Brannon was most desirable to her, she would have none of him if she had to show him that she liked him.

But the days following Brannon's departure for the south range to join the outfit proved to be slow-dragging and depressing despite her determination to forget what had happened.

Chong irritated her; the ranch-house seemed gloomy and oppressive; the outside world mocked her with its calm serenity and its smiling indifference to the turmoil that raged within her; and there were times when she stood on the big veranda staring into space through a filmy mist of tears, her lips tight pressed to keep them from quivering.

Her decision to go to Willets resulted from an irresistible impulse to seek companionship, or at least to look upon the faces of people of her own race. Chong's bland countenance and his servile, ingratiating manner disgusted her. Her own mood was too militantly belligerent to permit her to bear in patience the vast lonesomeness that had settled over the Triangle L.

She roped the horses, hitched them to the buckboard, and drove to Willets, arriving late in the afternoon.

Instantly she discovered that she had not wanted to come to Willets at all.

The town's lethargic atmosphere seemed to settle into the marrow of her bones; its squalor appalled her; its maudlin shanties offended her; its people provoked her to sardonic reflection—to the conviction that it was Brannon that she wanted to see, and not the town at all !

But she endured Willets until dawn. At that time she was up and dressed and descending the stairs of the hotel where she had passed the night.

She had made some purchases the night before; and these she lugged downstairs with her, carrying them outside to the stable, where she put them into the buckboard. She had resolved to leave Willets right after breakfast; but as she passed the hotel desk, behind which stood a tousled-haired, blear-eyed clerk whispering confidentially with two other men, disreputable-looking characters, she decided she would forego even the pleasure of breakfasting there.

She was in no hurry, though; and took her time stowing the packages into the buckboard. Then she returned to pay her bill.

As she stood at the desk she saw that the two men exchanged glances with the clerk—sly, oddly amused glances, significant of a secret understanding, of mutual knowledge with which she was in some way concerned.

Her blood pounded in her veins with righteous wrath, but she pretended not to notice the glances, paid her bill, and started out. But before she reached the door she heard one of the men say, in a loud whisper:

"Yes—Betty Lawson. That Eastern female she brought out here has been with Lattimer at the Lazy L for a week!" The vulgar laugh which followed his words almost provoked Betty to turn on him.

But she controlled herself. She went out and hitched up the horses, glad that she had fed and

watered them when she had brought the packages down. She worked swiftly, though with an outward show of deliberation, for she suspected that the men were watching her. She could not keep the crimson out of her cheeks, and her dismay over the thing she had heard was so deep that it seemed she could cry aloud for relief. Only once, though, as she worked with the horses, did she yield to speech, an almost tearful "Darn Lattimer!" which burst chokingly from her lips.

She backed the horses out of the shed after she got them hitched, and wheeled them in the stable yard with commendable deliberation, for she saw the men watching her from a window. And though the horses were eager for a run, she held them to a slow trot until she was fully a mile from town. Then she spoke to them, viciously:

"Now run, darn you!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

LIN MURRAY had slept peacefully while Cole Meeder and the other Star men had entertained Brannon; with his grizzled face turned upward in his bunk he had dreamed while Brannon had been pointing out to the Star men the evidence of Les Artwell's previous presence in the Triangle L stable. And Murray had not stirred when Brannon had ridden away with Meeder and his men.

But later Murray became aware of a hand in his hair, an ungentle hand that rocked his head back and forth; and of a sharp voice which seemed to have curiously penetrating power—and seemed to belong to some one he knew.

He awoke to stare with resentful perplexity into the glowing, determined eyes of Betty Lawson, who was standing beside him, and whose hand it was that seemed intent upon pulling his hair out roots and all.

"Hey—leggo!" he bawled protestingly. "What you a-pullin' my hair for?"

"Wake up, then, and listen to me, you infernal sleepy-head!" said Betty viciously. "What are you doing here? Where 's Brannon? What were Cole

Meeder and his men doing here? What did they want? Where did they go with Brannon?"

"Huh?"

Murray had gone to sleep with his clothes on; he now swung around and sat on the edge of the bunk, staring at Betty in huge astonishment.

"Wait a minute," he said, frowning. "Let 's get them questions straightened out. Hell!" he exclaimed, for the first time noting the intense excitement in Betty's eyes; "I reckon something 's happened!"

"Everything has happened, it seems!" said Betty. "I can't make head or tail out of anything Chong says, except that Cole Meeder and six or seven of his men were here; that they drew guns on Brannon, inspected the stable, and then rode south, Brannon with them."

"Hell's fire!"

Murray's eyes were a-gleam with apprehension; the profane exclamation was eloquent of impotence.

"Why did n't Chong wake me up? Why did n't Brannon rush them scum in here, so 's I 'd be wise to what they 're up to? They headed south, eh?"

Murray was buckling on his cartridge-belt. He was raging with impatience, muttering, grumbling, cursing.

"I 've knowed right along that somethin' was wrong!" he declared as he tightened the belt. "Ever

since I seen Brannon leadin' that Lazy L hoss south I 've been wonderin'—"

"A Lazy L horse!" Betty seized Murray by the shoulders and shook him. Her eyes were wide with excitement.

"Talk, Murray!" she commanded, stamping a foot furiously when Murray opened his mouth in astonishment at her vehemence: "What do you mean?"

"A Lazy L hoss," repeated Murray. "The day Miss Hamilton went away I saw Brannon an' a Lazy L hoss near the lean-to alongside the stable. Me an' Brannon was figurin' to ride south that mornin' an' I 'd overslept. Brannon come past here while I was rustlin' up some grub. He went to the stable. I seen him lookin' at a strange hoss, which was saddled an' bridled. I got them field-glasses your dad bought for us boys an' took a look at that hoss. It was branded Lazy L.

"I did n't say nothin' to Brannon. Brannon acted sort of sneakin' that mornin'. After he 'd sized the hoss up he went prowling around the stable an' inside of it. Then he came out again and took the strange hoss down the river a piece. Then after you 'd gone away lookin' for Miss Hamilton, Brannon told me he 'd changed his mind about joinin' the outfit.

"I went alone, an' Brannon rode south, toward Lattimer's place, leadin' the Lazy L hoss!" Murray

had tightened his belt to his apparent satisfaction, and now he asked, his perplexed eyes boring into Betty's:

"What do you suppose he was doin' with the Lattimer hoss?"

"That 's what I mean to find out, Murray!" said Betty. Her excitement had gone, suddenly. Her face was pale, her lips were set grimly, and her voice was cold. determined.

"Saddle two horses, Murray," she ordered. "Somebody 's going to talk—straight! I rather think it will be Satan Lattimer!"

CHAPTER XXIX

WHEN Brannon reached Ben Whitman's side Whitman toppled gently into his arms. The Star men were close behind him and together they lifted Whitman down and carried him to the veranda, where they got him stretched out and cared for his wound.

Lattimer's bullet had struck him in the chest rather high, and Meeder, who was first to examine the wound, declared the missile had not touched the lung and that Whitman had a fighting chance for life.

"He 's bled a lot, though," said Meeder; "an' he 's pretty well done up. I reckon one of you boys had better hit the breeze for town an' a doctor. Artwell won't need no doctor," he added, grimly.

"Artwell ain't dead yet, but he ain't far from it," volunteered a Star man who had helped to take Artwell off Whitman's horse.

Already another Star man was riding northward. Meeder did not answer the man who had volunteered the information regarding Artwell; his gaze was following the progress of the Star man who had ridden north. A little eastward from the Star rider

came a dust-cloud, and racing ahead of the cloud were two horsemen.

"We 're goin't to have company," announced Meeder.

Brannon, working with Whitman, turned to follow Meeder's gaze.

"Betty Lawson and Lin Murray," he said imperturbably.

Whitman, responding to cold applications over his wound and to sundry potions of water that Brannon succeeded in forcing down his throat, was reviving. His eyes opened; he struggled and sat up, determinedly pushing away Brannon's restraining hands.

He looked around; saw a Star man working over Artwell—who had also been laid on the porch—and the other Star men standing near, silently watching. He smiled wanly.

"Les ain't comin' around, I reckon," he said.

"Les is about due," said a Star man solemnly.

Whitman's smile grew regretful. "Looked that way to me," he said. "Him goin' that way will be a heap better—for his mother. You boys will let him—" He paused, to note the silence that greeted his uncompleted question, and at the surprised glances that met his.

"I reckon you boys did n't know Les had a mother," he said. And now his gaze rested upon

Betty Lawson, who had dismounted and had approached near enough to hear him.

"Les had a mother, all right," he added, his gaze on Betty's face; "only Les was some stubborn an' jealous, an' would n't talk much about her. His mother is my mother—Les bein' my half-brother. Les is pretty badly hurt, Betty," he said. "He 'll die, anyway. Mother would n't want him hung. I reckon if you 'd bring him around a little he 'd talk. He was tryin' to, all the way back."

"Who shot you, Ben?"

This was Betty. She had pushed Brannon away and was tenderly smoothing Whitman's forehead.

"Satan Lattimer," answered Whitman. "Betty," he whispered, "I reckon you 'd better have these boys go after Miss Hamilton. Lattimer 's got her. I trailed him as far as that big ledge just south of Boskin's Ford. That 's where he downed me. I reckon I was a little slow." His cheeks flushed faintly and he went on, still in a whisper:

"He must have told Miss Hamilton he was takin' her to Laskar; he tried to make me swallow that, too. But he was two miles off the Laskar trail, Betty; an' he 's takin' her to Panya Cache, where his gang of outlaws holes up."

He noted Betty's violent start, correctly divined the reason for it, smiled, and resumed haltingly:

"A lot of folks will be surprised. I ain't guessin' none. Satan Lattimer 's the boss of the gang that has been stealin' hosses around here. Les belonged to the gang. Lattimer got some sort of hold on him, I reckon. I 've knowed for a long time what Lattimer is, but I did n't say anything for fear mother would get wind of it. It would have hurt her bad to know that Les had gone wrong —so far.

"An' Lattimer fooled her; she set great store by him—thinkin' he was straight." He drew a deep breath; his voice grew weaker.

"Tell Brannon," he said faintly. "He 'll know where Panya Cache is. He 's the only man in the country Lattimer 's afraid of; he 's the only man in these parts that can sling a gun faster than Satan. He 'll have to—to—hurry, or Lattimer will—"

Whitman's eyes closed.

Betty stood erect beside him. Whitman's revelations had shocked her, despite her preconceived conviction of Lattimer's criminal character, of his ruthlessness, and of his reckless unconcern for the rules of fairness. She remembered that she had warned Josephine about Lattimer, and it seemed Josephine had deliberately disregarded the warning.

For an instant Betty entertained a vindictive thought, which was that Jo was being repaid for her obstinacy. And instantly came the seductive inner

voice of the tempter, telling her that no one need know where Lattimer was taking Jo. For no one beside herself had heard Whitman's whispering—

In the next instant Betty was facing Brannon. A crimson stain in her cheeks—the visible sign of the shame she felt because she had permitted a jealous impulse to take form in her mind—was accentuated by the paleness of her lips.

"Brannon," she said, "Satan Lattimer is taking Jo to Panya Cache against her will. Whitman just told me. Lattimer shot Whitman when Whitman tried to get Jo away from him. If you go right away you can catch him before he reaches the cache. Save her, Brannon!"

She felt Brannon's hands upon her arms, the fingers like steel bands constricting with terrific pressure. She could feel the man's muscles contract into rigid knots as he held her, turning her so that he might look into her eyes. His own were a-light with a cold fire that chilled and awed her; for the first time since she had known him she saw passion in them.

"What trail did Lattimer take?"

Brannon's voice was cold, calm, a curious contrast to the passion in his eyes.

Betty told him.

For an instant longer he held her, his eyes searching hers. Strange little pin-points of [illegible]

miration flickered at her. Then he released her and ran to his horse. He mounted with the black already running, paying no attention to the shouts of Meeder and the others.

Nor did Betty heed the shouts of the men. She was watching the black horse and its rider as they raced over the level; the horse running like a feather sailing upon a wind.

Betty watched horse and rider sweep over the broken, hill-dotted country between the house and the long slope opposite Boskin's Ford—a distance of several miles; she saw them later, dwarfed to toy-like proportions, moving jerkily upward toward the ledge upon which Whitman had encountered Lattimer during the night. And when horse and rider vanished over the crest of the long slope she turned to see Cole Meeder standing at her elbow.

"What 's got into the cuss?" demanded Meeder, wonderingly.

Betty told him and he laughed grimly.

"I reckon we 'll be goin' that way, too," he said. "Some of us, that is. I 'm leavin' a couple of the boys here with you. Whitman will come around all right, I reckon. Artwell has cashed in. But he talked first. Said he killed Callahan. He hid in the stable afterward; an' Miss Hamilton brought him over here—an' stayed here, nursin' him!"

CHAPTER XXX

JOSEPHINE'S disillusionment had come with appalling suddenness, and the shock was so great that she scarcely realized that Ben Whitman had been shot—killed; and that his body, pitifully inert, was lying near her. She stared at the tall, lax figure, lying face down on the ledge; she saw Lattimer standing over it, the smoking pistol in hand; she was aware that Les Artwell was stretched on his back beside his horse; and she heard Lattimer's words when he finally walked toward her.

But she could not convince herself that the tragedy really had occurred. Lattimer, the figures of the two men on the ledge, the horses, the basin, the peaceful moon swimming in the velvet-blue sky, seemed unreal, grotesque, like the settings of a drama of dreams.

Because this thing had never happened to her before, she felt that it could not happen; that one man would not dare to shoot down another man in so brutal a fashion. It was impossible, incredible! And yet there was Whitman, face down on the ledge, almost at her feet, murdered while she had looked on! On the ledge also were Lattimer, Les

Artwell, and the horses; below her, still beautiful, calmly silent, was the basin; above her swam the moon, serenely radiant.

The change she sensed had come to her alone; and suddenly she understood. She had visioned ideals and had tried to form them out of material already fashioned by the Creator. She had tried, but she had not made them over. She was a wilful, self-deluded girl who would not listen to the words of experience.

Betty had told her; had warned her about Lattimer. Brannon had tried to show her in a practical manner that her foolish principles were not deep enough, nor sound enough, to be applicable to a country in which the law was not firmly established. Brannon, despite his steel-like inflexibility and his thinly concealed contempt of her, had really tried to be kind to her!

Brannon had saved her from Denver; Betty had warned her that Lattimer was ruthless; that he would not hesitate to carry a woman into the mountains! She remembered how she had mentally scoffed at Betty's remark, thinking Betty was merely attempting to impress her with the picturesque character of the country's inhabitants.

Betty had merely stated the exact truth! Lattimer was at this moment giving her a practical

demonstration of his ruthlessness, and was intent upon carrying *her* away to the mountains!

Upon the day she had quarreled with Betty because she suspected Betty of doubting her word concerning the length of her stay at the Whitman cabin, she had felt the first pulse-beat of her new independence; she had become Western and had responded to the primitive impulses that had long been latent in her nature. She had shaken off the shackles of an effete and decadent environment; she had rushed headlong back to nature, to be unhampered by narrow conventions.

Disillusionment was complete, if painful. As she stood on the ledge watching Lattimer, who had halted and was gazing at her speculatively, she was aware that nature had never intended her for this sort of an existence. Her courage was too frail; she lacked the mental ruggedness and the moral sturdiness to fight her obstinate impulses, to confess herself in the wrong. She had been wrong all the time, but had not had the courage to admit it, even to herself.

In giving free rein to the primitive inclinations she had felt she merely had been attempting to dramatize her imagination; she had sought personally to enact a rôle that had been created in her mind by the conviction that her own yearning for the

romance of elemental life must inevitably fit her for it. It was the hunger that assails one who delves deeply into the printed page of adventure.

But she had failed. She had been obstinately wilful; she had antagonized Betty; she had opposed Brannon; she had fooled herself when she thought she had been fooling others. And now she had been tricked by a beast!

She knew now that Lattimer was a beast. As he stood watching her she saw his lips curve into a smile; a smile which seemed to be articulate with the knowledge that she had thought the thing out and was beginning to realize that she was lost.

Her knees knocked together as she watched Lattimer; she thought she must surely faint when he stepped toward her, a smiling triumph in his eyes.

"We 've got quite a ride before us, Miss Hamilton," he repeated.

"I won't ride a step farther with you!" she declared. She was astonished at the sound of her voice, at the shrill break in it, at the piercing note of terror that had got into it despite her conviction that she was not afraid of Lattimer and that at this minute she merely loathed him because of what he had done to Whitman and because he was what she knew him to be.

He laughed deep in his throat and stepped quickly toward her. She turned, and in an effort to evade

him swung against one of the horses, which reared and snapped at her. Before she could turn in another direction Lattimer's hands were upon her shoulder, and his face was close to hers. He held her in a grip that, she felt, must crush her.

She cried out sharply and he released her, stepping back a pace and regarding her with a steady, amused smile.

"I reckon you 'll ride with me, Jo," he said with easy familiarity, with a smooth, matter-of-fact note in his voice. "You 're not such a fool as to imagine that when I 've got you this far I 'll let you off. Ben Whitman ought to have known that—the fool!"

"You killed him for—for that?" she questioned. "Ben knew—he knew you—you were not going to Laskar?"

"That was mighty plain to Ben," he smiled.

Lattimer's answer, the light in his eyes, confirmed Whitman's charge that Lattimer intended to take her to some mysterious place called Panya Cache. A trembling weakness came upon her; a sudden, ungovernable grief over the contemplation of her folly. She pressed her hands tightly over her eyes and sobbed wildly, while Lattimer stood at a little distance watching her.

She was astonished when the tears ceased to come, when a cold rage succeeded the emotional breakdown. She could not explain the phenomenon; she did not

attempt to. She was merely conscious that she suddenly felt capable of enduring stoically the consequences of her obstinacy. She uncovered her eyes and looked defiantly at him.

"Suppose I refuse to ride, Lattimer?"

"I 'll carry you," he said. "You 're over it, eh?" he added laughing. "That 's sensible. You see, when I want a thing I use the most direct means of getting it. I 've wanted you from the day I heard Brannon had cottoned up to you!

"There 's always been a sort of jealousy in my heart for Brannon. I believe he 's the only man in the world I ever envied. He 's a real man from any direction you look at him. He 's the only man I ever met who made me feel that in a fight I 'd come out second-best. That conviction has always bothered me. But there 's no use in denying it. Whenever Brannon goes for his gun it 's time to requisition the mourners. I 'd have killed him long ago if I had n't been afraid to take the chance.

"Now you see, recognizing that I have n't a chance with Brannon with a gun in my hand, and hating him as I do, I 've got to use other methods to best him, to make him squirm. That 's the reason why I 'm taking you to Panya Cache—because Brannon likes you. The other reason is that I like you, myself.

"You 've been pretty high-handed with Brannon,

according to what I hear. You tried to make a fool of him in front of Denver; you made him look like a locoed yearling when you got Artwell away from him. Did you know that after you left my place the morning you brought Artwell over Brannon brought back the horse Artwell rode the night he killed Callahan? Did you know that on his way to bring my horse back he ran into Billy, the horse Artwell rode when you brought him to my place? And do you know that while you were at my house that morning you dropped a handkerchief and that Brannon saw it? Brannon has been wise to me for some time. He warned me. He knows—"

"Artwell killed Callahan?"

It had taken her many seconds to comprehend the significance of Lattimer's, to her, startling revelation. She stood silent afterward, searching Lattimer's face, noting his keen enjoyment of her astonishment; convinced by it that he was telling the truth.

"Artwell killed Callahan—and I helped him," she said finally, shuddering. "He killed Callahan, and I thought Brannon did it. Why," she went on, a startled, wondering light in her eyes, her voice falling to a whisper; "why, the morning I brought Artwell to your place you told me Brannon claimed to have shot Callahan. If he really said that he must have thought I shot Callahan!"

"That 's what he did," said Lattimer. "He thought so then. Later he must have suspected the truth."

Remorse, intensified by a realization of her complete helplessness, overwhelmed her. Her self-control deserted her; she cringed back from Lattimer and sobbed again passionately.

This last revelation, coming so quickly after her discovery of Lattimer's real character, completely unnerved her. She was aware of Lattimer's arms, clasped tightly around her, and she fought him, even while she knew she was hopelessly lost. She heard him speaking to her gruffly; felt herself being lifted into a saddle. And then, clinging desperately to the high horn, she was borne upward.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE black's first impetuous rush carried him over the level swiftly. His speed diminished as he swept around the bases of some low hills where rocks from the surrounding slopes, loosened by the elements, had rolled down and now littered the trail; he climbed a precipitous slope with the agility of a cat; straightened up for a long run along the crest of a ridge; dropped into a saccaton flat with sickening suddenness, went up another slope with a rushing clatter, and sped across another level to the base of the big hill upon which the night before Josephine had gazed down into the big basin.

Brannon dismounted at the base of the hill, slipped the bridle-rein over the black's head, and began the upward climb. It was now well toward noon, and though he had no means of knowing the exact hour in which Whitman had been shot, he reasoned that Ben must have consumed much time in reaching the Lazy L and that Lattimer would have several hours' start.

And yet Brannon expected to overtake him long before he could reach Panya Cache, for the cache was a hundred miles south, the trail was difficult in

spots, and Lattimer would be hampered by Josephine, also Lattimer would undoubtedly take his time, not anticipating that he would be followed, for he would not be aware that Cole Meeder, the other Star men, and Brannon had visited the Lazy L; and he must have thought his bullet had killed Whitman or, knowing Whitman had divined his destination—as Whitman had proved by telling Betty—he would have made certain of the man's death. Artwell, Brannon concluded, must have been close to death when Lattimer left him, so close that Lattimer had considered him a negligible factor.

The climb to the top of the hill was long and arduous; and Brannon halted there for a time to breathe the black horse and to recover his own wind. Then he mounted, descended sharply to a ravine, crossed it, reached a mesa, and headed toward a distant rise that marked the southern rim of the big basin.

Twice before Brannon had ridden this trail to Panya Cache. It had been in the days before the coming of Satan Lattimer to the big basin, when at the command of Betty's father he had broken up a band of rustlers who had operated in the section. The rustlers had worked northward from Panya, and Brannon's activities had taken him twice to the rendezvous before the band had been routed. In that campaign he had been assisted by nearly all of the cattle-men in the basin, and by various others

who had been victims of the depredations of the outlaws.

Brannon, therefore, knew the trail. As for that he would have had little difficulty in following Lattimer and Josephine, for the record of their passing could be read plainly in the soft stretches of the trail.

There were two horses, which fact indicated that Lattimer was not carrying the girl.

Brannon rode fast but carefully. By conserving the black's strength he might almost close the gap between himself and Lattimer during the day, and be able to make a final dash after nightfall if the race lasted that long. For even if Lattimer suspected he would be followed, he would have to permit Josephine to rest when darkness came; or he would have to carry her, which action would be fatal to speed.

Brannon made good time after he got out of the basin. For several miles he rode across a mesa, level, grass-covered, and beautiful, though desolate as the calm surface of a sunlit ocean.

Reaching the edge of the mesa he paused momentarily to search for the trail. Finding it, he urged the black down the crumbling channel of a washout to the razor-back crest of a rock ridge. Just before putting his horse to the downward slope of the ridge he halted, shaded his eyes with his hands,

and scrutinized the country ahead of him and at his right and left.

There was an abrupt downward trend to the trail. Below him spread a wide section of country. Ridges, giant hills, mammoth plateaus, rivers, two mountain ranges with serrated peaks, a divide, a mighty plain—all were distinct in detail, though so dwarfed in size by the distance from which he viewed them that they seemed insignificant.

A haze of many colors lay like a mantle over the vast section. Through the veil gleamed two barren peaks of the mountains. A deep canyon showed darkly purple. The waters of the rivers shimmered like liquid silver through rose-tinted gauze. Miles away the rugged walls of buttes and the uncompromising bulks of bastioned hills stood, enwrapped in the mystery that had swathed them since the hour of creation. Over it all was a slumberous silence in which there was no suggestion of life or movement.

It was noon before Brannon in his downward ride reached the broad shoulder of a mountain. About three o'clock in the afternoon he was riding a narrow ledge through a valley, fully thirty miles from the spot on the edge of the mesa where he had halted to view the country.

An hour later he was again climbing upward, over the irregular slopes and ledges of an upland. An-

other hour, and he had reached the crest of the long slope and was standing beside the black horse, peering southward, the sun almost at his back.

In the distance, where a ridge loomed high above a level, he detected movement. He waited, grimly patient, until he saw two tiny blots slowly taking form on the ridge—two horses with riders moving upward until they became clearly outlined on the horizon.

The figures were not more than two or three miles away.

Brannon swung into the saddle, patted the black's moist flanks, and spoke grimly to him:

"I reckon we 've got them, Nigger!"

Then he set out in pursuit of the distant riders; the black horse whinnying and tossing its head in apparent satisfaction, as though the occasion were one of ordinary significance.

CHAPTER XXXII

UNACCUSTOMED to long rides, exhausted by the strain of a continued contemplation of the hazards of the trail she had been forced to ride, and confronted by a hopeless future, Josephine sobbed despairingly as her horse slid down the slope of a ridge to a grass level.

The last bulwark of her courage had given way. On the long, tiresome ride she had been sustained by a secret hope that some one—Brannon, Betty, somebody—would discover her disappearance and come to her rescue. She felt she did not deserve any consideration or pity or sympathy from either Brannon or Betty; and she felt there was no possibility of their knowing what had happened to her, because she had been so secretive. Still she had hoped—until now.

It seemed to her that she had ridden into the very heart of desolation, from which there could be no possibility of rescue.

In the yawning gulf of distance that stretched before here there was no sign of life; nothing but hills and valleys and levels and silence and a sky that mocked her with its calm serenity. The immutable

fixity of the somber mountains on the remote horizon terrified her—they seemed so *aware* of her precarious predicament and so coldly indifferent. They seemed sentient, watchful, knowing; it was as though they comprehended and would not interfere.

Everything she saw gave her that impression. Their progress had not been impeded. An accident, any sort of an accident that would have delayed them would have been welcomed by her; she would have seized upon it as an omen of good. She believed she would have blessed a rock that would have broken a leg of one of the horses.

But nothing had happened. They had not ridden fast, but they had been always moving, and she knew they were many miles from the ledge where Ben Whitman had been shot.

Lattimer had said little to her. When she had recovered from her weakness soon after Lattimer had placed her in the saddle, she became aware that Lattimer was leading her horse and that her feet had been lashed to the stirrups. Later, though after they had traveled several miles, Lattimer had released her feet, his significant smile assuring her that he knew she would not attempt to return over the back trail alone.

Thereafter she herself had guided the horse.

And now as she directed it down the slope of the ridge, her hopes died and she yielded to tears.

Lattimer rode close and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Tired, eh?" he said.

He was deliberately mocking her, or did not understand. She did not know which. Nor did she care. She did not care what happened to her now.

And so she made no objection when Lattimer helped her down from the horse, telling her in a low voice that they would rest for a time.

When he left her to care for the horses, she dropped wearily into the long gramma grass at her feet and sat there, staring dully at her surroundings.

The grass level was small. At her right and left were lava-beds, worn and polished by the sand winds of ages. Back of her was the ridge over which she had just ridden; not more than a few hundred feet in front of her rose the ragged sides of a draw, the deep sand of its center lying dead and smooth. Beyond was desolation.

How long she sat in the grass communing with her despair she did not know. Not long probably, for when she again looked at Lattimer he had not removed the saddle he had been working at when she had turned to stare at the country.

She saw Lattimer start; heard him exclaim sharply. Following the direction of his gaze she saw a horseman come into view from the southern

side of the draw and ride rapidly toward them.

It was Denver!

He had appeared, it seemed, like an apparition. But she well knew that he might have been riding toward them for hours without their being aware of him; for there were hills and depressions and corrugations and gullies that one might take advantage of if one were inclined to be secretive; and she felt that Denver would not have shown himself, conceding he had seen them, until he had become reasonably certain of their identity. That sort of thing would be characteristic of the man.

Lattimer hailed Denver heartily. But Denver did not reply in kind. He jumped his horse through the sand draw, raced it across the little level, and brought it to a dizzying, sliding halt within a few feet of Lattimer. His face was set grimly; his eyes were blazing with excitement.

"Who 's trailin' you, Lattimer?" he demanded huskily.

Watching Lattimer, Josephine saw his face change color. It was evident that his thoughts had been upon the possibility of pursuit, for instead of replying to Denver he ran to the ridge over which they had ridden a few minutes before, threw himself flat, and peered over its crest. He remained there only an instant; then he ran back to where Denver sat on his horse.

"Brannon!"

There was fear in the exclamation; fear was lying naked in Lattimer's eyes. Denver's face whitened beneath the deep tan and the alkali dust upon it.

"Hell's fire!" he blurted. "We 're in for it!"

At the word "Brannon," Josephine had got to her feet. She stood now, tingling with a wild exultation; breathless with gratitude inexpressible.

"Brannon!" she heard herself saying, in a voice that she did not recognize.

Heedless of Lattimer's shout and Denver's violent profanity, she started to run toward the ridge, forgetting everything but the fact that Brannon was coming, that rescue was at hand.

She had gone only a few steps when she felt Lattimer's big arms around her. She was swept off her feet, lifted, and borne rapidly away from the ridge toward the draw through which Denver had appeared.

She tried to cry out, but the sound was stifled when Lattimer pressed her face tightly against his shoulder. It seemed only an instant from the time she started toward the ridge until she was being set down on her feet at the far side of the draw.

Denver was already there. She saw him ride his horse back of the draw, out of sight from the direction of the ridge; saw him lead it into a

depression, trail the reins over its head, and loop them around a rock.

Then Denver pulled a rifle from a holster on the saddle-skirt, ran to the sloping side of the draw, and began to clamber upward. He gained the top, threw himself flat behind a boulder that crowned the edge of the draw, and stuck the muzzle of the rifle through some screening weeds at the side of the rock.

Josephine had seen a significant glance pass between Lattimer and Denver as Denver began his climb to the crest of the draw, and she divined that somehow they had agreed upon a plan that boded ill for Brannon.

She looked at Lattimer; cringed from the smiling, malicious devil in his eyes; and linked his present demeanor with the sinister preparations that had been carried on before her eyes.

"Why—why," she cried, horrified, "you mean to shoot Brannon!"

"Denver will down him the minute he comes in sight over the ridge," said Lattimer.

He essayed to draw her closer, and feeling her passive in his arms he sought to shift his grasp. She suddenly twisted her body, squirming and writhign until she got her hands against his chest. He lost the grip of one hand because of her desperate energy; sought to regain it and was off balance

for a single instant. Her muscles, acting in accord with her frenzied thoughts, were quick to use the opportunity at hand. She shoved him viciously, so that he went down awkwardly on hands and knees.

Cursing, he threw himself at her, his clutching fingers just missing the hem of her skirts as she fled.

Twice she stumbled as she ran, the deep sand of the draw dragging at her feet; and once as she reached the edge of the grass level she fell. But she scrambled to her feet and ran onward toward the crest of the ridge expecting each instant to feel the deadening impact of a bullet from Denver's rifle, or the brutal grasp of Lattimer's hands at her throat.

Nothing of the kind happened. She reached the base of the ridge, clambered up, using the roots of bunch-grass that grew on the slope where the ascent was steepest; going to her knees once when she stumbled over a rock whose sharp edge came in contact with her ankle; but finally achieving the crest, where she stood, her breath sobbing in her throat, to see Brannon, now not more than a few hundred feet distant coming toward her, his horse in a dead run.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FOR one wild instant as she stood on the crest of the ridge Josephine considered running to meet Brannon, to tell him that Lattimer and Denver were lying in wait for him, and to urge him to take her on his horse. But she did not yield to the impulse, for the dangerous stretches of the back trail were vividly pictured in her mind—places where a horse had to step carefully, where progress was won by risking a fall into the dizzy depths of a cañyon—and she knew that Lattimer and Denver would follow, to await a long-range shot when Brannon, encumbered by her, should inevitably present the desired target.

She dismissed the plan from her mind as she went slowly down the opposite side of the ridge toward Brannon. Somehow she must save him.

There was only one way; and of course she must take that. Brannon had been her friend all along, trying in vain to make her see her folly—working subtly with her, lest he offend her; and she could not sacrifice him even to save herself from the degradation that confronted her. So, stilling the terrible tumult within her, desperately striving for

calmness, lest he suspect; that he might not doubt her sincerity—she contrived to smile at him as he pulled the black horse to a halt, slid out of the saddle, and confronted her.

She saw that his lips were set stiffly; that his eyes, even while they searched hers as though seeking to discover what had befallen her, were hard, cold, and alert; and that his gaze swept the length of the ridge suspiciously.

"You 're taking long rides lately," he said with grim humor.

"Do you think so?" she returned calmly.

She felt a pang of remorse over the sharp look he gave her. She knew his senses must be groping vainly in an attempt to solve the riddle of her unconcern.

"Look here," he said shortly, "what do you mean? Ben Whitman told us Lattimer had kidnaped you!"

Though her pulses leaped with joy over the discovery that Whitman was still alive, she sternly kept the emotion hidden and laughed lightly.

"So Ben did n't die, after all!" she said. "He followed us to the ledge, back there on a mountain. He seemed to think I was doing wrong. He even got quarrelsome and—and Lattimer had to shoot him."

Brannon's eyes were expressionless; though they

seemed to bore into hers, to penetrate until she felt he must be reading her thoughts.

"Seemed to think you were doing wrong!" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"What do *you* mean?" she retorted, smiling. "There seems to be a mistaken impression on the part of my friends that I am not capable of making my own choice in the matter of a husband. Is that what brought you here—a fear that Lattimer was running away with me?"

"That 's what I thought," he returned, his gaze unwavering.

She laughed, lightly, meeting his gaze fairly, as she knew she must if she was to deceive him.

"I came with Lattimer of my own accord, Brannon," she said.

His gaze still held. But after an instant there came into his eyes a gleam that baffled her.

"Well," he said in seeming indifference, "that is a matter which concerns only yourself. Where 's Lattimer?"

And now, despite the desperate courage that had so far upheld her, she shivered. He was determined to face Lattimer. She had hoped that after she had told him she had voluntarily gone away with Lattimer he would consider his responsibility

ended, and return the way he had come, to leave her to her own devices.

But she saw she had erred in thinking he would so readily leave her. She felt that he must suspect her of lying to him, or that he had something to say to the man about the shooting of Ben Whitman—though if Whitman were still alive—

She had forgotten Les Artwell! Perhaps Brannon's suspicions—mentioned to her by Lattimer—had centered upon Lattimer himself.

If that was why he was determined to see Lattimer, she might prevent him.

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Brannon," she said, "Les Artwell killed Callahan."

"I 've known that for some time," he said dryly, looking sharply at her.

"How?" she asked.

"Has n't Lattimer told you?" he laughed. "I took Artwell's horse over to the Lazy L the morning you dropped your handkerchief beside the porch. I see Lattimer has told you about *that!*" he said, with broad emphasis.

"I 'm having a talk with Lattimer," he added.

He began to walk toward the ridge.

Aware that certain death awaited him there she ran swiftly to him, linking her arm with his and laughing hysterically to keep from screaming.

She knew he would seek Lattimer despite anything she might say or do. There was a gleam of the old inflexibility in the depths of his eyes, a look that made her think of something mighty and deep, as of powerful forces moving irresistibly beneath the calm surface of a sea.

It would make no difference to him—the knowledge that Denver and Lattimer were awaiting him with hostile intentions; she felt that if she should tell him that Denver was lying in wait for him he would go over the ridge anyway.

And if she were to tell him now that she had lied to save him, he would not permit the sacrifice and would fight for her to the end. That, she knew, was what he had come for.

Arms linked together, they were already at the base of the ridge. She saw him watching her with covert glances, his eyes narrowed speculatively, as though he was wondering at her present mood, which contrasted so sharply to her former cold aloofness; but she pretended not to notice his glances; and when they started up the slope of the ridge she got in front of him, saying gaily:

"Ladies first, Brannon!"

Then, as he followed her, she was assailed with a fear that he would be too far behind her when the crest was reached. So she halted and smiled over her shoulder at him.

"You might take my hand, Brannon," she said.

In that manner they reached the crest of the ridge.

The girl paused, caught her breath, and stood rigid as she stared at the draw.

Lattimer was standing near the far side of the draw, where she had left him. It seemed he had not moved. She could not see Denver; but her gaze went to the filmy screen of weeds near the boulder behind which the man was concealed.

She had reached the crest of the ridge in advance of Brannon; she now stood between him and Denver's rifle. And though she was in the grip of an icy apprehension lest Denver chance a shot at Brannon's head—which rose, it seemed, to awful heights over hers—she again grasped Brannon by an arm, and with her free hand contrived to wave at Lattimer. That movement, she hoped, would confuse Denver, who might possibly withhold his murderous bullet, to await further orders from Lattimer.

That order was given, she knew. For her gaze, directed at Lattimer with an intensity that seemed to foreshorten distance, was upon his lips. She saw his lips move; saw him, as though in surprise, raise a hand and move it as though in half-hearted reply to her signal.

And now she was fearful that Brannon would become suspicious if she delayed. So she smilingly

jerked at his, arm, still linked with hers, and said, with just the hint of a taunt in her voice:

"Coming?"

Brannon did not reply; though arm in arm they descended the ridge and reached the grass level.

Josephine's legs had become leaden weights that were curiously unstable. All feeling had left them. The distance from the ridge to the draw seemed like the far-flung reaches of a continent. Her nerves were singing, her heart was pounding; there was no breath in her body.

But she did not relax her grip on Brannon's arm. Over all the irregularities of the ground; down through the deep sand of the draw, she manœuvered to keep herself always between Brannon and the muzzle of Denver's rifle.

And when at lest she and Brannon halted within two or three steps of Lattimer, she smiled brightly at Lattimer and said distinctly:

"Lattimer, I have just told Mr. Brannon that I am going with you to Panya Cache to become your wife. Ben Whitman told Brannon that you were taking me to the cache against my will! Is n't that ridiculous?"

Lattimer had watched the approach of Brannon and Josephine with puzzled, frowning eyes which had held a gleam of suspicion. Josephine's manner had given him a feeling that in some miraculous

way she had arranged for a peaceful meeting between himself and Brannon; and he had given Denver a signal to withhold his fire.

It was plain to him now from the way Josephine had managed it; and, quick to adapt himself to the new situation, he grinned with an appearance of cordiality, though there was mockery and triumph in his smiling, watchful eyes.

"So Whitman did n't die, after all?" he said, his gaze on Brannon.

"No," said Brannon, shortly.

"Whitman would n't even have been shot if—if he had n't interfered," said Josephine quickly, afraid that Lattimer might contradict the story she had told Brannon. "Is n't it odd that Whitman should have had the notion that you were taking me against my will, Lattimer?" She deliberately winked at the man.

"Yes, odd," said Lattimer. His eyes were now upon Josephine's; they were gleaming with admiration and relief. She had convinced him.

Josephine released Brannon's arm and patted him lightly, lingeringly, on the shoulder.

She had succeeded. The sacrifice would be made. Brannon was saved. She knew, now, that Denver would not use the rifle; and she was eager to send Brannon away, to have it over.

"You 'll go now, won't you, Brannon?" she said, smiling into his eyes. "Tell Betty—"

She screamed as Brannon moved. She felt one of Brannon's hands against her shoulder. She reeled from his violent shove, turned sidewise as she fell, and landed on her back in the sand, fully a dozen feet from Brannon.

But she did not take her gaze from Brannon even while falling; her tense muscles had made her body resistant, and she had gone down slowly, so that every move Brannon made was photographed for all time in her brain.

He leaped backward as he pushed her from him; his right hand had leaped to the holster at his right hip. The hand flashed back again, was flung upward, spouting smoke and fire. The roar of his six-shooter was blended with the vicious, snapping report of a rifle—Denver's—its smoke streaking from the side of the boulder on the crest of the draw.

Brannon sent one shot upward; his pistol hand moving as though he had merely tossed the leaden missile at Denver. The weapon swung down again, was snapped to a level; smoke and fire leaping in continuous lance-like streaks toward Lattimer, who had got his gun out and was trying to snap a shot at Brannon.

Lattimer's weapon went off; but the already deadened arm had no control over it, and slipped from his loosening fingers and fell soundlessly into the sand.

So rapid had been Brannon's movement that the girl was certain Lattimer and Denver fell simultaneously. At least so it seemed to her strained and horrified senses.

While Lattimer, his glazed eyes expressing a sort of dazed astonishment, was sagging oddly forward, going slowly to his knees, Denver, on the crest of the draw, was toppling inertly forward. He slid gently down the sand slope and lay in a huddled heap at its base; while Lattimer, seeming to have deliberately selected a spot in which to die, dropped to it slowly and stretched out as though going to sleep.

In the weird, deep silence following, Brannon stood, looking somberly from one to the other of his fallen enemies. Neither moved, and Josephine knew it was over.

Brannon said nothing. He did not even look at her. So she got up, eager to get away from the spot, and made her way to the little grass level near the ridge. There she sank into a heap and cried over the horror she had witnessed; though she knew there had been justification for it all.

She must have fainted. For when she opened her eyes after an interminable time she saw Brannon on the crest of the ridge near her.

Dusk had fallen. The land looked gray and dead and the sky was faintly blue and dotted with stars. She got up.

Brannon heard her and came down to where she stood, watching her with level eyes.

"Somebody's coming," he said. "From the north. Most likely it's Cole Meeder and some of the Star men. What are you going to say to them? Are you going to tell them the lie you told me, that you went with Lattimer willingly?"

"You knew?" she said, astonished. "You knew I—I lied?"

He laughed softly.

"Denver and Lattimer forgot one thing," he said. "It was that I had eyes. From where I was riding some time before you came to meet me, I could see the top of the draw. I saw Denver climb it; watched where he was hidden. Besides, even if I had n't seen him, I—" He paused, placed both hands on her shoulders, and looked at her with eyes in which there was mingled reproach and admiration.

"You don't lie convincingly, Jo," he said; "you have n't practised it enough. But it was a mighty fine thing you did—a mighty fine thing!"

She cried softly.

Later he led her to the crest of the ridge where, with the shadows deepening around them, they watched Cole Meeder and the other Star men ride toward them.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AS on another day Josephine sat in a comfortable rocker on the veranda of the Triangle L ranch-house, contemplatively gazing out into the vast reaches of the big basin.

With the majesty of peace in her soul she could permit her thoughts to dwell upon the past with some degree of satisfaction; for if they had done nothing more, her experiences in this grim country had fixed upon her senses a conviction that one could not, at a stroke, alter one's nature so that it would fit snugly into a new environment.

Closing her eyes and reviewing her experiences from the beginning, when she had first looked into Brannon's eyes there beside the railroad track, until that other time, three days ago, when she had again looked into Brannon's eyes as they both stood on the ridge and watched the Star men riding toward them, she saw that the rules of life as she had known them were not elastic enough to stretch across the continent to this wilderness.

She felt that Brannon typified the West, as she was representative of the East. She had heard people say that human nature is the same all over the world, and though she was not prepared to

quarrel with that conclusion she was convinced that it had not been carried far enough. It should have been amended to include something regarding environment.

Brannon, for example, had lived all his life in the West. She remembered Betty's saying he was a descendant of Boone, which indicated that where the wilderness reigned he was at home. Would he be the same Brannon if suddenly he were set down in the very center of civilization?

Josephine thought he would not be the same. Perhaps he would be as inflexible, and perhaps his impulses would be as violent. But before the rigid laws of her country his inflexibility would be shattered and his impulses would have to be sternly guarded. The law would not be in his hands, but in the collective hands of all the people, to be administered by one of their own selection.

Therefore he would not be the same Brannon.

At any rate, East or West, she would be afraid of him. In the beginning she had fought against him, believing she hated him. Now she realized that the thing she had fought was merely the spell of the romance that had seemed to surround him. Since she had seen him kill Lattimer and Denver the bubble of romance had been shattered. She did n't love him; she did not even like him; though she admired him for his rugged mental strength, and for the iron control that he had demonstrated

so convincingly on the day he had faced Denver's rifle. "Steel" Brannon! She would always remember him—that was certain!

She saw him coming now, riding toward her across a level sweep of plain northward. She watched him, noting the graceful ease of him in the saddle; felt again the romance of him.

But she smilingly shook her head and thought of a certain Eastern man who would have looked askance upon chaps and spurs.

Brannon came on, brought the black horse to a halt at the edge of the veranda, and twisted sidewise in the saddle. His smile was broad, friendly—nothing more.

"So you 're leaving us?" he said. "I just heard it from one of the men. I rode in to say good-by."

"Twenty miles?" she said, referring to the distance he had ridden. She had heard Betty mention it.

"Well," he said, eying her gravely; "you would n't want me to miss saying good-by to you?"

She laughed lightly at the reproof in his voice.

"I am afraid you will be glad when I am gone," she said, watching him keenly.

"Oh, no," he said, his eyes flashing, "you 've been mighty interesting."

"Brannon," she said—for now that she was about to leave she wanted to be sure he had no regrets, for she remembered the night he had placed a hand

on her head with a touch that had been almost a caress, "are you sure you have found me merely—interesting?"

"I think that is all, Miss Hamilton—just interesting," he said, steadily regarding her. "You see, hating me as you do—"

"Did," she corrected.

"As you did," he amended with a smile, "I did n't presume to—"

"Brannon," she interrupted, "is it Betty?"

His eyes quickened; he flushed. But his voice was steady.

"I reckon it 's Betty," he said. And then for the first time since she had known him, she got a glimpse of the gentle, human side of his character. The blush suffused his face; his steady eyes wavered, held an abashed gleam.

"If she 'll have me," he added.

Josephine's eyes were eloquent with secret knowledge. She smiled complacently.

"Why don't you ask her, Brannon?" she said, gently.

"I 'm thinking of it," he said, soberly. "I 've been thinking of it for two years. You see, Betty don't seem to give me any encouragement."

"She won't run after you, Brannon!"

"That 's so!" he said, admiration over Betty's sterling qualities glinting his eyes. "She certainly is a hummer, is n't she, Miss Hamilton?"

"If I were a man I should think her very desirable, Brannon," she smiled. "Also," she added dryly, "I should be afraid that some other man would come along and speak to her before I got a chance. And I think you have a chance, Brannon!"

He was grateful, and boyishly elated; and he gave her a glance that made her pulses leap, that gave her a hint of how much she would have regretted leaving him if fate had willed that things were to be otherwise.

But the emotion passed quickly. In the next instant she was shaking hands with him, for he had got off his horse to say farewell.

"You 're leaving on the five o'clock, I reckon?" he said.

"Lin Murray is hitching up the horses, now," she answered. "I shall leave here inside of ten minutes."

"Betty 's going with you as far as Willets?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said gravely, "I 'll say good-by in town. There's times when Lin Murray is n't reliable."

He left her and walked toward the corral, where Lin Murray was hitching the horses to the buckboard.

At the end of ten minutes the buckboard whirled up to the edge of the veranda. Brannon was alone in the driver's seat. His face was set stoically.

Josephine had gone into the house to get her things; and when Betty came out Josephine was directly behind her.

Betty was half-way across the gallery before she saw Brannon, lounging unconcernedly in the buckboard.

She halted, her cheeks crimson.

"Brannon," she said, "where is Murray? I told him he was to drive us to town!"

"Murray 's sick," he returned quietly, not meeting her gaze. "Lucky I came in, was n't it?" he added, now turning to look at her; whereat the flame deepened in her cheeks. "You 'd have had to drive home alone."

Betty might have been alone for the first few miles of the return trip for all the oral evidence she had of Brannon's presence. His conversation was limited to monosyllables directed at the horses that loped steadily through the deepening dusk.

But Betty did not speak more than Brannon; for there were certain regrets that made the hearts of both heavy—regret that a young woman who had come West with ideals had remained to see them destroyed by contact with the type of man who is ever present in all communities—the breaker of laws.

"She should n't have interfered as she did, though," said Brannon suddenly, voicing a thought.

"No," said Betty, quite as though she were taking

up the thread of a previous conversation. "That was where she made a mistake."

"Her second was in hating me," said Brannon. "I tried—"

"She did n't, Brannon!"

"Did n't what?"

"She did n't hate you. She never will! Why, when you were talking to her on the veranda, just before we left; she said—"

"You were listening?" he charged. He leaned toward her, peering at her through the deepening dusk, to see that her cheeks were aflame.

"I—I could n't help it, Brannon," she said. "You see, I was just coming out, and when I got to—to—"

She paused, curious to know why Brannon had sighed so deeply.

"Why did you do that, Brannon?" she asked.

"Tickled," he returned. "I 've been two years trying to tell you what I told her. I reckon I never would have had the courage to do it."

"But you must, Brannon," she whispered. "I would never be satisfied to know that you told another woman—even though I heard—"

With no hand to guide them, the horses finally came to a halt to crop the sweet grasses that grew beside the trail; while the man whose courage had earned him the sobriquet "Steel" told to his predestined mate the old, old story which is always new; which is the same to-day and to-morrow and which knows no North, no South, no East, no West.

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